THE DEAD

THE ENEMY IS BACK . . .

CHARLIE HIGSON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF YOUNG BOND

PUFFIN BOOKS

THE DEAD

CHARLIE HIGSON

Charlie Higson is a well-known writer of screenplays and novels, and is the author of the phenomenally successful Young Bond series. He is also a performer and co-creator of *The Fast Show, Swiss Toni* and *Bellamy's People*. Charlie is a big fan of horror films and is hoping to give a great many young people sleepless nights with this series.

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THE DEAD

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For Alex

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And Jon Surtees at the Oval for a great guided tour that was slightly wasted on a non-cricket fan like myself.

I would thoroughly recommend a visit to any of these fine institutions, whether you want to check out the locations from the books or whether you are interested in English history and culture.

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One Year Later

The Scared Kid

When the video is posted on YouTube it's an instant hit. Within days everyone's talking about it.

'Have you seen the "Scared Kid" video?'

'It's really freaky.'

'At first I thought it was a joke, but it looks so real.'

'It's definitely fake, but it's still scary.'

'I can't watch it. It's too frightening.'

'Who is he? Do you know who he is? Who's the Scared Kid?'

'Nobody knows …'

Maybe it's a clever trailer for a new horror film? Maybe it's a viral ad for something. A new car or a chocolate bar? Or just maybe it's real …

There's something about it. Something about the kid. No ten-year-old is that good an actor. And if someone's playing a trick on him they are *really* sick and they've done way too good a job. Who would do that? Who would deliberately scare a young kid that much? And why has nobody come forward to explain it all?

Even after everything that happens, when the whole world changes forever, when everyone knows that the video wasn't a hoax, but the start of something terrible, people will remember the Scared Kid. His poor frightened little face.

It's like the last thing everyone saw before the lights went out.

He sits there at his computer talking into a web cam. It's clear he's been crying for ages, his eyes are red raw, his face streaked with tears. He's shaking uncontrollably and his teeth are actually chattering. You can hear them. It would be funny if it wasn't so weird. He can hardly get his words out. They tumble over each other.

‘I don’t know what to what to do I don’t know they’ve killed Danny and Eve they killed Danny and Eve Danny and and Eve and Eve and and … they’re outside now I can see them I can see them outside there are three mothers and a father …’

That’s the freakiest bit, the bit that sticks in people’s minds, that he calls them mothers and fathers.

‘They came to the house and they killed they killed Danny and Eve there’s blood omigod – omigod there’s blood three mothers and a father they’ve killed Danny and Eve make them go away please make them go away …’

Then he picks up the web cam and turns it to point out of the window. It veers all over, lights smearing the screen. Now you can see the street. It’s night-time. The picture’s awful but you can just see these four people under the street lights – *three mothers and a father* – three women and a man, and near to them what looks like a dead body. The body of a child.

There’s something not right about the people. They don’t look like actors. The way they’re standing. And when one of them looks up at the camera it’s the most awful thing … a dead-eyed look, like an animal. Are they actors? The picture’s so bad it’s hard to tell.

Then the Scared Kid’s voice again.

‘Can you see them? They’ve gone crazy – three mothers and a father – they’ve been trying to get back in into the house but Danny and Eve they’re dead they’re dead and I don’t know where my mum and dad are there’s nobody else here they’ve all gone it’s only me …’

The camera moves again. You can hear crashing and smashing in the background. Shouting. Now the kid’s back at his desk, staring into the lens, like he’s staring into the grave. Even more terrified than before. Shaking. Shaking.

‘I’m going to post the video – Danny showed me how – they killed him three mothers and a father I have to do it quickly I don’t know what’s happening I don’t think anyone will help me I think I’m going to die like like …’

And that’s the end of it.

Some other kids do impressions of him, and post them. There’s a remix of the kid done to a death metal soundtrack. But the thing is – the video is scary because it seems so real. People watch it over and over, trying to understand it. And when adults start dying, when it becomes clear that some terrible new disease is striking everybody over the age of fourteen, the Scared Kid begins to look like some kind of prophet.

Within a very short time ‘Scared Kid’ becomes the most watched YouTube clip ever. After a month it’s taken down. There’s a message saying it’s been removed. The day after that the whole YouTube site is

taken down without any explanation.

And the day after that the Internet stops working.

It just disappears.

That's when people finally realize that something serious is happening.

THE ACTION IN THIS BOOK BEGINS JUST OVER A YEAR BEFORE THE INCIDENTS DESCRIBED IN *THE ENEMY*.

1

Mr Hewitt was crawling through the broken window. Sliding over the ledge on his belly. Hands groping at the air, fingers clenching and unclenching, arms waving as if he was trying to swim breaststroke. In the half-light Jack could just make out the look on his pale yellowing face. A stupid look. No longer human. Eyes wide and staring. Tears of blood dribbling from under his eyelids. Tongue lolling out from between cracked and swollen lips. Skin covered with boils and sores.

Jack stood there frozen, the cricket bat held tight in sweating hands. He knew he should step forward and whack Mr Hewitt as hard as he could in the head, but his right arm ached all the way down. He'd been swinging the bat all night and the last teacher he'd hit had jarred his shoulder. Now it hurt just to hold the bat, which felt like a lead weight in his hands.

He knew that wasn't the real reason, though. When it came down to it, he couldn't bring himself to hit Mr Hewitt. He'd always liked him. He'd been Jack's English teacher for the last year. He was one of the youngest and most popular teachers in the school, always talking to the boys about films and TV and console games, not in a creepy way, not to get in with the kids, simply because he was genuinely interested in the same things that they were. When the disease hit, when everything started to go wrong, Mr Hewitt had done everything he could to help the boys. Trying to contact parents and make arrangements, keeping their spirits up, comforting them, reassuring them, always searching for food and water, making the buildings safe …

And when it had got really bad, when those adults who'd got sick but hadn't died had started to turn on the kids, attacking them like

wild animals, Mr Hewitt had helped fight them off.

He'd been tireless and it had looked like he might escape the sickness.

He'd been a hero.

And now here he was, crawling slowly, slowly, slowly into the lower common room like some huge clumsy lizard. He raised his head, stretching his neck, and wheezed at Jack, bloody saliva bubbling between his teeth. Jack could see two more teachers behind him, attempting in their own mindless way to get to the window.

Jack swallowed. It hurt his throat. He hadn't had anything to drink all day. They were running low on water and trying to ration it. His head throbbed. This was the second night the teachers had attacked in force. Jack's second night without sleep. The stress and the tiredness were turning him slightly crazy. His heart felt all fluttery and he was constantly on the edge of losing it, breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing, or laughter, or both. He was seeing things everywhere, out of the corner of his eye, shapes moving in the shadows. He would shout a warning and turn to look and there would be nothing there.

Mr Hewitt was real, though, something out of a waking nightmare, slithering in, inch by inch.

The last hour had been a chaotic panicked scramble of running around in the dark from room to room, checking doors, windows, battering back any teachers that got past the defences. And then they'd heard breaking glass in the lower common room, and he and Ed had come charging in to see what was happening.

And there was Mr Hewitt.

Jack couldn't do this alone. He looked for Ed and saw him crouched down behind an overturned table, his grey face poking over the top, eyes white-rimmed and staring. Ed, his best mate. Ed who everyone thought was cool. Clever without being cocky or a suck-up. Good-looking Ed who all the girls went for. Ed who beat him at tennis without really trying. Jack had always felt second in line to him, even though the two of them did everything together, hung out all the time, shared books and comics and music, played on the same football team, the same cricket team.

Last year the school had produced a glossy booklet advertising itself to new parents, and there on the front cover was Ed – the boy most likely to succeed. The happy, smiling, confident face of Rowhurst.

Well, this was the new face of the school, hiding behind a table, scared halfway to death, while the teachers crawled in through a broken window.

Ed reminded Jack of someone.

The Scared Kid.

Ed was totally bricking it, and his fear was making him next to useless.

'Help me,' Jack croaked.

'I'm keeping watch,' said Ed, a slight catch in his voice.

Yeah, right, keeping watch … Keeping safe more like.

Jack sighed. His own tiredness and fear were turning him bitter.

'If you won't help,' he said, 'at least go and get one of the others.'

Ed shook his head. 'I'm staying with you.'

'Then do something,' Jack shouted. 'Hewitt's nearly through. I need help here.'

'What …? What do you want me to do?'

Jack rubbed his shoulder. He'd had enough of the school. He'd had enough of this mess, night after night, the same bloody ritual. Right now he'd rather be anywhere else than here.

Most of all he wanted to be at home, though. Back in his own house, in his own room, with his own things. Under his duvet, with the world shut out.

Home …

He tossed the bat to Ed. It bounced off the table and ended up on the carpet.

'Hit him, Ed,' he said.

'I'm not sure I can,' Ed replied.

'Pick up the bat and hit him.' Jack felt tears come into his eyes and he squeezed them tight then pinched the wetness away.

'Please, Ed, just hit him.'

'And then what?' Ed asked. 'They just keep coming, Jack. We can't kill them all.'

'Hit him, Ed! For God's sake, just hit him!'

2

Ed looked at the bat, lying in a strip of moonlight on the worn-out carpet. The electricity had gone off three weeks ago. Nights were blacker than he had ever known they could be.

He didn't know what to do. He knew he should help Jack, but he was paralysed. If he did nothing, though, wouldn't it be worse? The teachers would get him, just as they'd got Jamey and Adam and Will. They'd come in with their horrible filthy nails and their hungry teeth. They'd grab him …

Maybe that would be better. To get it over with. All he could see ahead of him was a never-ending string of dark nights spent fighting off adults, as, one by one, his friends were all killed.

Get it over with.

Shut your eyes, lie down and that would be that …

He saw a hand reaching out towards the bat. As if he was watching a film. As if it was happening to someone else. The fingers closed around the handle.

His fingers.

He picked up the bat and raised himself into a standing position. The blood was pounding in his head and he felt like he was going to throw up at any moment. If he came out from behind the table and ran forward now, he could get Mr Hewitt before he was fully through the window and on to his feet. He could help Jack. They'd be OK.

Yes.

He pushed the table out of the way and crept forward. What if Mr Hewitt sped up, though? What if all the diseased adults weren't slow and confused? It was easy to make a mistake. Every boy who'd been taken had made some stupid mistake. Had been careless.

Ed raised the bat just as Hewitt flopped on to the floor. For a moment he lay there, unmoving. Ed wondered if he was dead. Then the teacher rolled his head from side to side and forced himself up so that he was squatting on the sticky carpet. He belched and vomited a stream of thin clear liquid down his front. It smelt awful.

'Hit him, Ed.'

Ed glanced over at Jack. He was stooped over, breathing heavily, his eyes wild and shining. Exhausted. The strawberry birthmark that covered one side of his face and gave him a permanently angry look was like a splash of blood.

'Hit him now.'

When Ed turned his attention back to Mr Hewitt, the teacher had straightened up and was shuffling closer. There were three long jagged tears down the front of his white shirt. Ed's eyes flicked to the window frame where a row of vicious glass shards stuck up along the lower rim. Mr Hewitt must have raked his torso across them as he crawled in, too stupid to realize what was happening. Blood was oozing from behind the rips and soaking his shirt. His tie had been pulled into a tight, stringy knot.

There was a noise from outside. Already other shapes were at the window, jostling with each other to get through.

Hewitt suddenly jerked and lashed out with one hand. Ed staggered back.

'Hit him, Ed,' Jack hissed angrily, on the verge of crying. 'Smash his bloody skull in. Kill him. I hate him. I hate him.'

The thing was, Ed hadn't hit a single one of them yet and he didn't know if he could. He didn't know if he could swing that bat and feel it smash into bone and flesh. He'd never enjoyed fighting, had always managed to avoid anything serious. The fact that most people seemed to like him and wanted to be his mate had kept him out of trouble. He'd grown up thinking it was wrong to hit someone else, to deliberately hurt another person.

And not just any person. It was Mr Hewitt, who until about two weeks ago had been friendly and normal …

Normal. How Ed longed for things to be normal again.

Well, they weren't ever going to be normal again, were they? So swing that bloody bat. Feel the bone break under it …

He swung. His heart wasn't in it, though, and there was no force to the blow. The bat bumped feebly into Mr Hewitt's arm, knocking him to the side. Hewitt snarled and lunged at Ed who cried out in alarm and jumped backwards. One of the table legs poked him in the back, winding him and knocking him off balance. He fell awkwardly, his head bashing against the table. He lay there for a moment in stunned confusion until a shout from Jack brought him back to his

senses.

Where was the bat? He'd dropped the bat. Where was it?

It had fallen towards Mr Hewitt who had stepped over it. Ed couldn't get to it now and neither could Jack. Not without shoving Hewitt out of the way.

And Hewitt was nearly on him. There was just enough light to see the pus-filled boils that were spread across his face. He raised both his hands to chest height, ready to make a grab for Ed, and his shirt pulled out of his trousers.

'Help me, Jack!'

But before Jack could do anything there was a bubbling, gurgling sound, like a clogged-up sink unblocking, and an appalling stink filled the room. Mr Hewitt howled. The glass had evidently cut deeper into his belly than any of them had realized. He looked down dumbly as his skin unzipped and his guts spilt out.

Now it was Jack's turn to vomit.

Mr Hewitt dropped to his knees and started scooping up long coils of entrails, as if he was trying to stuff them back into his body. Jack moved at last. He kicked Hewitt over, grabbed the fallen bat then ran to Ed.

'Come on,' he said, seizing Ed's wrist and pulling him to his feet. 'We're getting out of here.'

3

They bundled out into the corridor and Jack pulled the door shut.

'I'm sorry,' said Ed. 'I can't do this.'

'It's all right,' said Jack, and he hugged Ed. 'It's all right, mate, it's all right.'

Jack felt weird; it had always been the other way round. Ed helping Jack, Ed cool and in control, gently mocking Jack, who worried about everything. Jack never sure of himself, self-conscious about his birthmark. Not that Ed would ever say anything about it, but it was always there, like a flag. What did it matter now, though? In a list of all the things that sucked in the world his stupid birthmark wasn't even in the top one hundred.

'Should we try and block the door somehow?' said Ed, making an attempt to look like he was in control again.

'What with?' said Jack. 'Let's just get back upstairs to the others, yeah?'

'What about the teachers?' said Ed, looking fearfully at the door.

'There's nothing we can do, Ed. Maybe the rest of them will be distracted by Mr Hewitt. I don't know. Maybe they'll stop to eat him. That's all they're looking for, isn't it, food? You've seen them.'

Ed let out a mad laugh. 'Listen to you,' he said. 'Listen to what you're saying, Jack. This is nuts. Talking about people eating each other. It's unreal.'

But Ed *had* seen them. A pack of teachers ripping a dead body to pieces and shoving the bloody parts into their mouths.

No. He had to try not to think about these things and concentrate on the moment. On staying alive from one second to the next.

'All right,' he said, his voice more steady now. 'Let's get back to

the others. Make sure they're all OK. We've got to stick together.'

'Yeah.'

Ed took hold of Jack's arm.

'Promise me, Jack, won't you?'

'What?'

'That whatever happens we'll stick together.'

'Of course.'

Ed smiled.

'Let's go,' said Jack, dragging his torch from his pocket and shining it up and down the corridor. There were heavy fire doors at either end that the kids kept shut to slow down any intruders. This part of the corridor was empty. They had to keep moving, though. They had no idea how long the other teachers would be delayed in the common room.

Ed suddenly felt more tired than he'd ever felt in his life. He wasn't sure he had the energy just to put one foot in front of the other. He knew Jack felt the same.

Then one of the fire doors banged open and Ed was running again.

A teacher had lurched through. Monsieur Morel, from the French department. He'd always been a big, jolly man, with dark, wavy hair and an untidy beard; now he looked like some sort of mad bear, made worse by the fact that he seemed to have found a woman's fur coat somewhere. It was way too small for him and matted with dried blood. He advanced stiff-legged down the corridor towards the boys, arms windmilling.

The boys didn't wait for him; they flung themselves into the fire door at the opposite end but as they crashed through they collided with another teacher on the other side. He staggered back against the wall. Without thinking, Jack lashed out with the bat, getting him with a backhander to the side of the head that left him stunned.

Jack and Ed came to a dead stop. This part of the corridor was thick with teachers. God knows how many of them there were, or how they'd got in. Even though they were packed in here, there was an eerie silence, broken only by a cough and a noise like someone trying to clear their throat.

Ed flashed his torch wildly around, and almost as one the teachers turned towards him. The beam whipped across a range of twisted, diseased faces, dripping with snot, teeth bared, eyes staring, with peeling skin, open wounds and horrible grey-green blisters.

They were unarmed and weakened by the sickness, but they were still larger and on the whole more powerful than the boys, and in a big group like this they were deadly. The boys had fortified one of the dormitories on the top floor where they were living, but there was no way Jack and Ed could make it to the stairs past this lot.

They couldn't go back and try another way, though, because Monsieur Morel was even now pushing through the fire door, and behind him was a small group of female teachers.

'Coming through!'

There was a loud shout and Ed was dimly aware of bodies being knocked down, then Morel was shunted aside as a group of boys charged him from behind. At their head was Harry 'Bam' Bamford, champion prop forward for the school, and bunched next to him in a pack were four of his friends from the rugby team, armed with hockey sticks. They yelled at Jack and Ed to follow them and cleared a path between the startled teachers who dropped back to either side. The seven boys had the muscle now to power down the corridor and into the empty entrance hallway at the end. They kept moving, Ed running up the stairs three steps at a time, all tiredness forgotten.

They soon reached the top floor and hammered on the dormitory door.

'Open up! It's us!' Bam yelled. Below them the teachers were starting to make their way on to the stairs.

There were muffled voices from the dorm and sounds of activity.

'Come on,' Jack shouted. 'Hurry up.'

Monsieur Morel was coming up more quickly than the other adults, his big feet crashing into each step as his long, muscular legs worked like pistons, eating up the distance.

At last the boys could hear the barricade being removed from the other side of the door. They knew how long it took, though, to move the heavy wardrobe to the side, shunting it across the bare wooden floorboards.

There had to be a better system than this.

Jack turned. Morel was nearly up.

'Get a move on.' Ed pounded his fists on the door, which finally opened a crack. The boy on the other side put an eye to the gap, checking to see who was out there.

'Just open the bloody door,' Bam roared.

Morel reached the top of the staircase and Jack kicked him hard in the chest with the heel of his shoe. The big man fell backwards with a small, high-pitched cry, toppling down the stairs and taking out a group of teachers on the lower steps.

The door swung inwards. The seven boys made it through to safety.

4

The adults were scraping the dormitory wall with their fingers and battering at the door. Now and then there would be a break, a few seconds' silence, and the boys would hear one of them sniffing at the crack down the side of the door like a dog. Then the mindless frenzy of banging and scratching would begin all over again.

'Do you think they'll give up and go away?' Johnno, one of the rugby players, was standing by the heavy wardrobe that the boys used to barricade the door. He was staring at it, as if trying to look through it at the adults on the other side.

'What do you reckon?' said Jack, with more than a hint of scorn in his voice.

'No.'

'Exactly. So why ask such a stupid question?'

'Hey, hey, hey, no need to start getting at each other,' said Bam, stepping over to put an arm round his friend's shoulder. 'Johnno was just thinking out loud, weren't you, J? Just saying what we're all thinking.'

'Yeah, I know, I'm sorry,' said Jack, slumping down on to a bed and running his fingers through his hair. 'I'm all weird inside. Can't get my head straight.'

'It's the adrenalin,' came a high-pitched, squeaky voice from the other side of the room. 'The fight or flight chemical.'

'What are you on about now, Wiki?' said Bam, with a look of amusement on his broad, flat face. Wiki's real name was Thomas. He was a skinny little twelve-year-old with glasses who seemed to know everything about everything and had been nicknamed Wiki, short for Wikipedia.

‘Adrenalin, although you should properly call it epinephrine,’ he said in his strong Manchester accent. ‘It’s a hormone your body makes when you’re in danger. It makes your heart beat faster and your blood vessels sort of open up so that you’re ready to either fight off the danger or run away from it. You get a big burst of energy, but afterwards you can feel quite run down. It’s made by your adrenal glands from tyrosine and phenylalanine, which are amino acids.’

‘Thanks, Wiki,’ said Bam, trying not to laugh. ‘What would we do without you?’

Wiki shrugged. Before he could say anything else there was an almighty bang from outside and all eyes in the room turned back to the door.

Ed looked around at the grubby faces of the boys, lit by the big candles they’d found in the school chapel. Some of these boys had been his friends before, some he’d barely known. They’d been living in this room together now for a week and he was growing sick of the sight of them.

There was Jack, sitting alone chewing his lip, the fingers of one hand running backwards and forwards over his birthmark. Bam with his four rugby mates, Johnno, Piers and the Sullivan brothers, Damien and Anthony, who had a reputation for being a bit thick and had done nothing to prove that they weren’t. Little Wiki and his friend Arthur, who almost never stopped talking. A group of six boys from Field House, over the road, who stuck together and didn’t say much. Kwanele Nkosi, tall, elegant, and somehow, despite everything, always immaculately dressed. Chris Marker, sitting by the window, reading a paperback book (that’s all he did now, read books, one after another; he never spoke) and ‘the three nerds’, who were all in Ed’s physics class.

Nineteen faces, all wearing the same expression: dull, staring, slack, slightly sad. Ed imagined this was what it must have been like in a trench in the First World War. Trying not to think about tomorrow, or yesterday, or anything.

Apart from the nineteen boys in this room, Ed was alone in the world. He had no illusions that his mum and dad might still be alive. About the only thing the scientists had been able to say for sure about the disease, before they, too, had got sick, was that it only affected anyone over the age of fourteen. His brother, Dan, was older than him, eighteen, so he’d probably be dead, too, or diseased, which was worse.

The last contact Ed had had with his family was a phone call from his mum about four weeks ago. She’d told him to stay where he was. She hadn’t sounded well.

There were probably other boys around the school, hiding in

different places. He knew that Matt Palmer had taken a load over to the chapel, but basically Ed's world had shrunk down to this room.

These nineteen faces.

It scared him to think about it. How shaky his future looked. He felt like a tiny dot at the centre of a vast, cold universe. He didn't want to think about what was outside. The chaos in the world. How nothing was as it should be. It had been a relief when the television had finally shut down. No more news. He had to concentrate on himself now. On trying to stay alive. One day at a time. Hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second.

'How many seconds in a lifetime, Wiki?' he asked.

Wiki's voice came back thin but sure. 'Sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four hours in a day, three hundred and sixty-five days in a year, actually three hundred and sixty-five and a quarter because of leap years, so let's say the average life is about seventy-five years, that's sixty, times sixty, times twenty-four, which is, er, eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds in a day. Then three hundred and sixty-five days times seventy-five makes, let me see, twenty-seven thousand three hundred and seventy-five days in seventy-five years. So we multiply those two numbers together …'

Wiki fell silent.

'That's a big sum,' said his friend Arthur.

'Never mind,' said Ed. 'It doesn't matter.'

'It's a lot,' Arthur added, trying to be helpful. 'A lot of seconds.'

And too many of them had been spent in this bloody room. They'd dragged beds into here from all round the House, so that they didn't get split up, but it meant it was crowded, stuffy and smelly. None of them could remember the last time he'd washed, except perhaps Kwanele. He had had his school suits specially made by a tailor in London and used to boast that his haircuts cost him fifty quid a shot. He was keeping himself clean somehow. He had standards to maintain.

The room was made even more cramped by a stack of cardboard boxes at the far end. They'd once contained all their food and bottled water, but there was virtually nothing left now. They had supplies for two more days, maybe three if they were careful. Jack was looking through the pile, chucking empty boxes aside.

There came an even bigger bang and the wardrobe appeared to shake slightly. They'd packed it with junk to make it heavier and it would need a pretty hefty shove from outside to knock it out of the way, but it wasn't impossible.

'We've got to get out of here,' Jack muttered.

'What?' Ed frowned at him.

'I said we've got to get out of here.' This time Jack's voice came

through loud and clear and everyone listened. ‘It’s pointless staying. Completely pointless. Even if that lot out there back off in the morning, even if they crawl back to wherever it is they’re sleeping – which we don’t know for certain they will do – we’re gonna have to spend all day tomorrow going round trying to block up the doors and windows again. And then what? They’ll only come back tomorrow night and get back in. We can’t sleep, we can’t eat. Luckily none of us got hurt tonight, but … I mean, if the teachers don’t get us, we’ll basically just starve to death if we stay here.’

‘Yeah, I agree,’ said Bam. ‘I reckon we should bog off in the morning.’ Bam’s voice sounded very loud in the cramped dormitory. He had always had a tendency to shout rather than speak and before the disaster the other boys had found him quite irritating. He was large and loud and boisterous. Blundering around like a mini tornado, accidentally breaking things, making crap jokes, playing tricks on people, laughing too much. Now the others couldn’t imagine how they’d cope without him. He never seemed to get tired or moody; he was never mean, never sarcastic, and totally without fear.

‘We need to find somewhere that we can defend easier than this,’ Bam went on. ‘Somewhere near a source of food and water.’

‘The only source of food around here is us,’ said Jack.

‘They might go away,’ said Wiki’s friend Arthur. ‘They might all die in the night – lots of them are already dead. If we hold on long enough, they’ll all die, they’ll pop like popcorn. You see when Miss Jessop, the science teacher, died? She was lying on the grass in the sun, lying down dead and her skin started to pop like popcorn, the boils on her kept bursting, like little flowers all over her. You see like when flowers come out in a speeded-up film? Pop, pop, pop, and after a while there wasn’t anything left of her, she was just a black mess, and then a dog started to eat her and the dog died, too.’ Arthur stopped and blinked. ‘I think we should stay here until they all go away or pop like popcorn.’

‘They’re not going to go away,’ said Jack, going over to the window where Chris was still reading his book, his eyes fixed on the pages. There was a bright moon tonight, and it threw a little light into the room, but Jack doubted if it was enough to see the words properly. Not that that stopped Chris. Nothing could stop him now.

Jack looked down into the street. There were two teachers down there and an older teenager, maybe seventeen or eighteen. They were hobbling along, walking as if every step hurt their feet.

‘Some of them die from the disease and some don’t,’ he said. ‘Who knows why?’ He turned back from the window to point towards the door where one of their attackers was rattling the handle. ‘And who knows how long that lot out there are going to take to die? Could be

weeks, and in the meantime they know we're here and they won't give up until they've got us. They're going to keep on attacking, every night, soon as it's dark, every bloody night. Most of the other boys left ages ago. Us lot, we stayed in case anyone turned up to rescue us. Ha, good one. Nobody *has* turned up, and, let's face it, nobody will.'

'Two billion three hundred and sixty-five million and two hundred thousand seconds …' said Wiki quietly. 'Roughly. In a lifetime. If you're lucky …'

5

It took four of them to shift the wardrobe aside in the morning. Aware that they were moving it for the last time.

Once the door was clear Bam put his ear to it. He looked at Jack. Jack licked his lips, tense.

'Well?'

Bam shook his head. 'Can't hear anything.'

'Go on then.'

Bam grasped the handle, turned. It clicked and the door popped open a fraction. He checked that everyone was ready. A row of boys stood waiting. They'd pulled the metal bed frames apart to make weapons out of the struts and heavy springs, and they'd packed up whatever supplies and belongings they had left into backpacks or bundles made out of sheets.

'Ready?'

The boys nodded. Bam took a deep breath and tugged the door open.

A pale, sickly light washing in from the small windows showed that the area outside was empty.

The teachers had gone.

One by one the boys filed out on to the landing, wary and alert. They were shivering. Their combined body heat had kept them reasonably warm in the dormitory, but it was early March and the air out here was noticeably colder.

'Look at that.' Johnno nodded towards the door. The outside of it looked like it had been savaged by a pack of wild animals. There were gouges and great dents, long gashes, as if from claws. It was worst round the handle. The teachers had almost managed to scrape right

through the wood. The walls were similarly scarred, with chunks missing and a pattern of bloody handprints.

'Looks like we only just made it out in time,' said Bam. 'One more night and they'd have been on us.'

It stank on the landing. There was evidence that at least one of the teachers had used the carpet for a toilet. There was torn wallpaper down the stairs and a fresh splash of blood up one wall. Maybe they'd been fighting among themselves.

'Come on.' Bam led the way down. Behind him came Johnno and his other mates from the rugby team, carrying vicious metal lengths of bed frame, with ripped-up sheets wrapped tightly round the ends to protect their fingers. Next came Jack and Ed, Jack with the cricket bat, Ed with a hockey stick. Behind them were Arthur and Wiki, chatting away to each other, wobbling bedsprings up and down in their hands. Then Chris Marker, still reading a book as he walked, a makeshift pack slung over his back crammed with yet more books. Then the three nerds, carrying wooden clubs made from chair legs. After them came Kwanele, immaculate as ever in his suit and tie, lugging an expensive suitcase and suit bag, filled with his favourite outfits. Finally the six boys from Field House, watching their rear and armed with an odd assortment of garden tools.

At the bottom of the stairs the carpet was black and sticky, as if a tub of treacle had been poured into it. The boys' trainers stuck to the floor and squelched as they lifted their feet. It smelt worse down here, a foul brew of blood and dead flesh and unwashed bodies. Sweet and sour and putrid.

The main way in and out of the building was through two big double doors. The first thing Mr Hewitt had organized when they'd decided to secure the House was nailing the doors shut with planks of wood. They'd been using an alternative exit through the back of the kitchen as a way in and out, because it was quicker to open and close and easier to lock. They had keys for the back door as well as the kitchen door, so had an extra line of defence. It had turned out to be a complete waste of time, though, as the sick teachers soon found other ways to get into the House.

Bam put a hand over his mouth to block the stink.

'This way,' he said, leading the group down the corridor that led towards the kitchen.

It was dark in the corridor and they walked quickly. All the boys wanted to get outside as fast as possible. They soon arrived at the kitchen door, which had a small, reinforced-glass window set in the centre, crisscrossed with a wire mesh.

Bam strode up to it, as eager as the others to be out of here. He took a big bunch of keys from his pocket, selected the right one and

slotted it into the lock. He was just about to turn it when Jack pulled him back.

'Wait a minute.'

Bam stopped. A flash of irritation. Then a little laugh.

Jack sighed. 'Come on, Bam, you could at least check it before you open it.'

'Sorry, old mate, brain not in gear. Never did work at a hundred per cent, to tell you the truth, turned to mush now. Still asleep, I think.' He knocked the side of his head with his fist. 'Wakey, wakey!'

Jack stuck his nose to the little window and peered into the kitchen. It was dark; the sun rose on the other side of the building and its light hadn't reached this far yet. He could see no movement in the gloom. Then he spotted that the back door was half open. Someone had definitely been in there during the night.

'What do you reckon?' Bam asked. 'Is it safe?'

'Hang on a minute. Can't tell.'

Jack's eyes were slowly growing used to the light. He was picking out more details in the kitchen. There was a scarlet smear of blood on the window over the sinks. And there, on the table, what looked like a slab of meat. He realized there was an arm still attached to it. He swallowed, trying not to retch.

'I'm not sure we should go this way,' he said.

'Are there some of them in there?' Bam asked, trying to see over Jack's shoulder.

'It's hard to tell.'

'Here, let me look.' Bam shoved Jack aside and took his place at the window.

'Not a pretty sight, is it? Don't think there's anyone in there, though … Whoa!' He leapt back as a female teacher hurled herself at the door, squashing her face against the glass and smearing it with pus. It looked like Miss Warlock, from the English department, but it was hard to tell.

The shock made Bam burst out laughing and soon most of the other boys had joined in. Jack just stared at the door, which shook on its hinges as Miss Warlock repeatedly rammed herself against it with a whining and a slobbering noise.

Ed crept forward and risked looking in.

'There's more than one of them in there,' he said. 'We'll have to go another way.'

'You don't say,' Jack murmured.

'And we need to be quick,' said Ed, ignoring Jack. 'They could break this door down if there's enough of them. Or they might just figure out that there's another way in – however they all got in last night.'

They backtracked down the corridor, increasingly nervous and anxious to be out of the building that was feeling more and more like a trap. When they got back to the hallway, they headed for the doors.

Jack saw what looked like a football sitting in the middle of the floor. He had an urge to race forward and kick it, an automatic response. He took several paces then came to a dead stop, almost overbalancing, like someone suddenly finding themselves at the edge of a cliff in a cartoon film.

It wasn't a football. It was a human head. All that was left of Mr Hewitt. His eyes were open, and he looked calm and at peace. He no longer resembled the deranged maniac he'd been when Jack last saw him.

Now Bam spotted the head.

'Bloody hell,' he said with a laugh. 'Better get rid of that. Bit freaky.'

He picked the head up gingerly by the hair then lobbed it across the room towards a waste bin that sat in a dark corner. Amazingly it landed cleanly inside. Bam cheered and punched the air.

'Shot!'

Jack didn't know whether to laugh or curl up in a ball and bang his forehead on the floor in despair. He stood there, drained of all energy, wishing he was a million miles away.

Bam, Johnno and Piers, with bits of iron bedstead, set to work on the door, trying to lever the planks off. It was slow work, made slower by the fact that the boys had hardly slept again in the night and were strung out, awkward and sluggish, their muscles not working as they should, as if the signals weren't getting through clearly from their brains. In the end Jack couldn't bear to watch them clumsily struggling to make any headway; he came back to life and went over to help.

As they worked, they could hear the teachers down the corridor, bashing and thumping against the kitchen door.

'Can't you hurry up?' said Kwanele, who was standing back, watching, his luggage sitting neatly at his feet, for all the world as if he was waiting for a train.

'We're going as fast as we can,' said Bam.

'If you're in so much of a hurry,' said Jack irritably, 'why don't you help? Or don't you want to get your clothes messed up?'

'I'm not very good with my hands,' said Kwanele, flattening a lapel on his suit jacket. 'And, yes, I don't want to ruin my clothes. This shirt is Comme des Garçons.'

Jack shook his head and tutted. If Kwanele wasn't so ridiculous, the others would have long ago lost patience with him.

There was one last plank left to remove. Bigger and thicker than

the others, with about ten fat nails fixing it to the door. The boys were getting in each other's way and Johnno's weapon slipped, gouging Piers' hand. Piers sucked his fingers and swore at him.

There came an almighty crash from the kitchen.

Jack glanced back. *Had the door finally given out?*

'Come on, come on,' he said, as much to the piece of wood as to the other boys. He was scrabbling at the plank with his fingers, trying to prise it loose, and he was so intent on removing it that he lost track of what was going on behind him. It was only when he heard a high-pitched scream that he turned round.

There were teachers in the hallway. Six of them, including Monsieur Morel, who had his hands at the throat of one of the Field House boys and was shaking him like a doll. The boy's friends were battering the teacher with their makeshift weapons. The rest of them were being kept back by the Sullivan brothers and the three nerds, who stayed in a tight pack, yelling and screaming abuse.

Ed was with the rest of the boys, who were milling in a frightened circle, not sure what to do.

Johnno gave his iron strut to Jack and snatched a fire extinguisher from a bracket on the wall.

'You get the door open,' he shouted. 'We'll deal with this lot.'

Ed ran over to help Jack and between them they managed to get the bit of bedstead behind the plank. They pulled down on it with all their weight and with a horrible squealing noise the nails began to pull loose.

Johnno hit the plunger on the top of the extinguisher and a stream of white foam erupted from the hose. He aimed it at the circling teachers, blinding them.

Monsieur Morel was still savaging the boy from Field House. The blows raining down on his back seemed to be having no effect.

With a final screech, the plank popped off the door. Jack grabbed one end and raced back to Morel.

'Out of the way!'

He swung the piece of wood at the man's head and it stuck fast. One of the nails must have punched through his skull. Morel stood up, the plank hanging from the back of his head like a huge ponytail. He stretched out an arm towards Jack, then went stiff and shuddered before falling sideways, knocking over Miss Warlock, who slipped and slithered about on the floor, unable to stand up in a pool of melting foam.

'Come on,' Bam yelled from the doorway. 'Let's go! Let's go!'

'We don't know what's out there.' Ed looked worried.

'Can't be any worse than what's in here,' Jack shouted as he ran over and pushed past Ed.

Ed closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to find some small scrap of courage hidden deep inside.

When he opened his eyes, he realized that he'd been left behind. The others had already gone outside. He hurried after them and found them in a tight pack, blinking in the early-morning light. The boys from Field House looked shell-shocked. Ed realized their friend hadn't made it. He said nothing. Too sick to speak.

There didn't appear to be anyone else around out here, but a low moan from behind him caused Ed to turn around. The teachers were emerging from the House, covered in foam. They were too sick to move fast, and the boils and sores covering their skin made them walk as if they were treading barefoot on broken glass, but the boys knew from experience that they wouldn't stop. Once they started to follow they wouldn't give up.

'Leg it!' Bam shouted, and the boys raced across the open ground towards the main school entrance.

Ed stayed at the back, helping Wiki and Arthur. They were smaller than everyone else and slower. Ed didn't know what he'd do if one of them got left behind. He urged them on, shouting encouragement, aware all the time that the teachers were steadily lumbering along behind them.

They rounded the end of School House and headed towards the archway that led out into School Yard. Ed spotted Jack ahead. He was hanging back, staring at the administrative building by the main gates.

What now?

Ed was too scared to stop. He sprinted through the arch, but, as he ran past, Jack grabbed hold of his jacket and pulled him back.

Wiki and Arthur ran on.

'What's the matter?' Ed's voice rasped in his throat.

'Can you see that?' said Jack, and he blinked, as if not wanting to trust his own eyes.

Ed turned in the direction Jack was looking. For a moment he could see nothing.

'What?' he said, scared and angry and desperate to get away. 'What am I looking for?'

'Over there. The office where the school secretaries work.'

'What? What is it …? Oh, my God.'

There was a girl at the window, hammering on the glass, her mouth forming a silent scream.

6

‘Who the hell is it?’

‘Dunno. Never seen her before in my life.’ Jack’s voice sounded as dry and croaky as Ed’s.

‘We should keep up with the others,’ said Ed, nervously glancing over to the road where Wiki and Arthur were disappearing from view.

‘We can’t just leave her there,’ said Jack.

‘No … I know … I didn’t mean that.’

‘Then what did you mean?’

‘I don’t know.’ Ed massaged the back of his neck. Couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘We’re going to go and help her,’ said Jack. ‘OK?’

Ed turned back towards the archway. There was no sign of the teachers yet, but it was only a matter of time before they came through.

‘OK,’ he said.

A look of relief flooded the face of the girl in the window as they hurried over to the building. She was thin, with long hair and a slightly large nose and mouth. Her cheeks were wet with tears and her eyes red.

The boys gestured for her to open the window. She shook her head and indicated that it was locked.

‘Why doesn’t she just use the door?’ Ed asked as he and Jack went along to the front entrance. His question was immediately answered as they came upon a small pack of teachers scrabbling in the covered entranceway to get inside.

The two boys backtracked quickly and, luckily, the teachers, too intent on trying to get in, didn’t see them. When they got back to the

window, the girl was crying again, and knocking uselessly against the glass with a shoe.

'That's no good,' said Jack. 'It's toughened glass.'

Ed tried to control his fear, fighting the urge to suggest that they should leave her, and then he spotted two big green wheelie bins on the other side of the yard.

'We could use one of them,' he said, pointing. 'Like a battering ram.'

'We'll try it,' said Jack, and they raced across the cobbled paving to grab a bin. All the other boys had gone down the road and Ed realized he was alone with Jack in the yard.

No. Not totally alone. The first of the teachers who had attacked them inside was shuffling through the arch, still dripping with foam.

The boys trundled the bin across the cobbles, rattling and banging on its small wheels. The noise sounded like thunder and Ed was scared it would attract the teachers in the porch.

'Stand back!' he yelled at the girl when they were close, then he and Jack hoisted the bin up on to their shoulders and, still running, launched it at the window. There was a terrific bang as the window disintegrated. For a few seconds there was no sign of the girl, and then she slowly revealed herself in the empty window frame, looking pale and shocked.

'Can you climb out?' Jack asked.

'I think so,' said the girl, her accent strange, foreign-sounding.

'Be careful of any broken glass,' said Ed, remembering what had happened to Mr Hewitt last night. The girl disappeared again and when she reappeared she was carrying a duvet and some blankets which she draped over the windowsill. Then once more she went off to get something.

'Get a move on,' Ed murmured under his breath. The teachers were advancing across the yard, and as they drew closer Ed got a good look at them. Their eyes were yellow and bulging, their skin lumpy with boils and growths, horrible pearly blisters nestling in the folds. They were streaked with foam and one or two of them had bright red blood dribbling from their mouths. One had an ear hanging off. It flapped as he waddled along. Another had some sort of huge fleshy growth bulging out from his shirt, as if he'd swallowed a desk lamp. His whole body was twisted and misshapen.

There was a shout from the window. The girl was standing there with a large plastic carrying-box. She passed it out to Ed and he realized that there was a tabby cat inside it, huddled, terrified and shivering, down at the end. Once the cat was safely out the girl manoeuvred herself over the window ledge and Jack helped her to the ground. Her whole body was shaking and her breathing quick and

shallow.

She flung her arms around Jack with a great sob and buried her face in his shoulder, soaking his jacket. She kept saying the same thing over and over, her voice muffled.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you …'

'We've got to keep moving,' said Jack, pushing her away from him. 'We've got to get away from here.'

The girl nodded and took the cat from Ed. She looked inside the box making little reassuring noises, and then spoke to the cat in what sounded like French.

Ed looked at the teachers. The girl hadn't seen them. They were getting closer by the second.

'We need to hurry,' he said, and the girl tore herself away from the cat, her large eyes very wide. Even like this, her hair a mess, her face blotchy from crying, it struck Ed that she was pretty.

He tugged at her arm, but she resisted.

'My father,' she said. 'I don't know where is my father.'

'Who's your father?' Ed asked, even though he knew it was a stupid thing to say.

'Monsieur Morel. He is a teacher here. He was looking after me. But yesterday he goes out. He is feeling sick, he goes for medicine, he does not come back. I wait for him. I wait all through the night. He does not come back.'

The girl stopped. She had finally noticed the panicked look on Ed's face. She glanced over her shoulder and gasped as she saw the teachers, almost close enough to touch.

Jack snatched hold of her arm and dragged her along, forcing her to run at his side.

'You've got to forget about your father,' he said. 'All the adults, everyone over the age of fourteen, gets sick. They die, all right? Or they turn into … one of them.'

'Is he … Is he sick?' said the girl, her voice high-pitched with tension. 'Is he changed?'

'No,' said Ed as they ran out of the school gates. 'No, he's not.'

'Have you seen him?' asked the girl. 'You must tell me.'

'Yes.' Jack exchanged a pained look with Ed. 'We saw him. He's dead. Sorry.'

'I knew it …' The girl choked out the words then wailed in despair. Jack shook his head at Ed. Best not to say any more. At least neither of them had lied.

Ed hadn't left the school grounds for a few weeks. It hadn't been safe. And it was strange seeing the main road with no traffic. Even on a Sunday there had always been cars going past at all times of the day and night. Now it was utterly still and calm. Birds were singing in the

trees, oblivious to how the world had changed. Not caring about the humans and their problems.

How quickly everything had fallen apart.

In a strange clear-headed moment Ed realized that for a while the world was going to be a better place for the birds, for all animals. No more cars, no more pollution, no more factories, aeroplanes, oil wells, coalmines …

There was a very strong chance that soon there would be no more humans. What chance did children have of surviving? What was the point of going on? What was the point of crossing the road? Running, fighting, hiding …

He didn't stop, though. Something inside made him keep on running, just as something had made him pick up the bat last night.

He looked back. They'd left the teachers behind. Nobody else had come through the school gates. Maybe they'd be safe for a while.

A little further down the high street on the other side of the road was the school chapel. It was only about two hundred years old but had been built to resemble a small medieval church, complete with bell tower and stained-glass windows. It was easy to see why Matt Palmer had thought it might be a safe place to hang out. There were battlements round the top of the tower that made it look like part of a castle.

Matt had come over here about ten days ago with some other boys. If he could be persuaded to join them and look for somewhere better to hole up, they'd have safety in numbers.

As Jack, Ed and the girl entered the gate and crossed the graveyard, they saw that the rest of the boys from the party were up ahead, huddled in the entranceway to the church. Why hadn't they gone in as they'd arranged?

'They won't open the door,' Johnno explained when Jack and Ed ran up. 'They won't even answer us.' He stopped when he saw the girl, and frowned quizzically at Jack and Ed.

'This is Monsieur Morel's daughter.' Jack gave a look to the boys that said '*keep your mouths shut*'. 'Don't know her name.'

The girl seemed to have retreated into herself. Her hair hung down either side of her face like curtains and she stared at the ground. Johnno went over to her. He was a good-looking lad and had always been confident and successful with girls. Not all the boys could say the same. Rowhurst was an all-boys school and many of them had had little female contact.

Johnno squatted down so that he could look up into the girl's face.

'What's your name, love?' he asked. The girl remained silent.

'Come on, tell us your name. You're safe now.'

‘Frédérique,’ the girl muttered, barely audible.

Johnno put a hand on her arm. ‘I’m Johnno,’ he said. The girl didn’t respond. Johnno looked round at his friends, eyebrows raised, not sure what to do next. They were pretty shocked by the morning’s events and if they hadn’t been trying to tough it out and not look weak in front of each other they might all have turned in on themselves like Frédérique.

Ed had been taking a look around. There was some evidence that teachers had been trying to get into the church, but the heavy oak doors looked almost indestructible and the windows were too high to reach and laced with metal. He slammed his fists against the door.

‘Matt!’ he yelled. ‘Matthew! Open up! It’s us! Open the bloody doors.’ He stopped and listened, head bowed. Nothing. Not a sound.

‘Maybe they’re not in there,’ he said. ‘Maybe they’ve all gone.’

‘We need to get inside,’ said Arthur. He was staring back at the road. Three of the teachers were crossing towards them. Miss Warlock, the man with the twisted body and Mr Langston, an old history teacher. His grey hair was standing up like a crest on top of his head. He looked bewildered.

‘There’s a door at the side,’ said one of the Field House boys. ‘You can get in through the vestry. We use it for choir practice.’

‘Could we force it?’ Jack asked.

The choirboy shrugged.

‘Well, why mention it, then?’ Jack snapped viciously. ‘What use is that to us?’

‘There’s a key,’ the choirboy muttered. ‘Mr Lewis, the choirmaster, uses it sometimes. We’re not supposed to know about it, but we all do.’

‘Why didn’t you say that before? Show us.’

The choirboy led them round to where there was a lower, flat-roofed extension to the side of the chapel. A tiled overhang protected the door. The choirboy put his hand up under the beams and felt around until he found what he was looking for and brought down two keys on a ring. He quickly selected one, shoved it into the keyhole, twisted it and pushed the door open.

A rush of air was sucked through the doorway as if the church was breathing in, and the boys started to cough as they crept cautiously inside, their eyes stinging. There was the smell of smoke. A thin haze hung in the vestry and they found it difficult to fill their lungs. The vestry was filled with stuff for the church, prayer books and choristers’ robes and the chaplain’s bits and pieces.

‘There’s no oxygen,’ said Ed.

‘You don’t say, Einstein,’ Jack sneered.

Ed angrily turned on his friend and put a hand on his chest,

holding him back as the others carried on through to the church. ‘Leave it out, Jack. For God’s sake. Stop giving everyone a hard time. What’s the matter with you? You never used to be like this.’

‘Yeah, I know, sorry.’ Jack cleared his throat and spat on the vestry floor, then he ran his fingers over the red birthmark on his face. ‘But *nothing* used to be like this, really, did it?’

Jack looked at Ed, defying him to argue.

‘Well, it’s the same for all of us,’ Ed croaked. ‘How does it help, you constantly having a go?’

‘I said sorry, didn’t I?’

‘Did you? It didn’t sound like much of an apology.’

‘What does it matter?’ said Jack, shrugging off Ed’s hand. ‘What does any of it matter? Hello, goodbye, please, thank you, sorry, I beg your pardon, can you pass the salt, please? What bloody difference does any of it make now? We’re up to our necks in crap.’

Ed couldn’t think of anything to say so simply shook his head and followed the others through to the chapel.

There was a metal dustbin in the middle of the aisle with some smouldering wood in it and a murky cloud of smoke clung to the roof beams. There were about fifteen boys in here. Some were lying in sleeping bags and under duvets on the floor, others were slumped on the pews.

‘Are they dead?’ asked Bam, scanning the lifeless bodies.

Ed didn’t know if it was the foul air in the church, his fear or simply exhaustion, but the blood felt tight in his head, which throbbed horribly. His lungs were burning. Without being conscious of it, he’d been holding his breath since his argument with Jack. He approached one of the boys on the floor and realized with a jolt that it was his friend Malik.

He reached out a hand. Malik looked like all the blood had been drained out of him. He was completely still. Ed touched his neck. It was damp and cool but not cold. He knelt down by his side and put his ear to his chest. There was the faintest heartbeat, barely a flutter, a tiny rise and fall of his chest.

‘No. They’re not dead.’ Ed stood up – too quickly. He felt instantly dizzy and swayed on his feet.

‘We need to get them out of here,’ said one of the nerds. ‘They need fresh air.’

‘There are no windows open,’ said Wiki, looking around. ‘If they’ve been burning wood, there’ll be carbon monoxide. It’s given off when there’s not enough oxygen left for organic matter to burn properly. It’s a deadly poison. It could poison us all.’

7

The Sullivan brothers managed to unbolt the main doors of the church and they threw them wide. Johnno and Piers, their friends from the rugby team, had picked up a comatose boy, but they hung back in the doorway.

They'd forgotten about the teachers.

The bigger of the two, Piers, looked back anxiously. 'They're still out there,' he said.

Jack strode over to where Piers had put down his weapon and snatched it up without stopping. He continued on outside. Bam followed, a grim look on his face. Mr Langston the history teacher was trying to get the gate open, his swollen, mushy fingers unable to get a proper grip. Next to him Miss Warlock and the other teacher were shaking and moaning.

Jack carried on walking. Nothing was going to stop him. He went right up to Mr Langston and swung the bit of iron hard at the side of his head. Langston went down.

Bam vaulted the wall, knocking Miss Warlock over, and then took a swing at the third teacher. The blow jarred his head to a weird angle, but he stayed on his feet. Jack climbed over the wall and came up on the teacher from behind. There was a nasty wet crack as Jack hammered his club into the back of his skull.

None of the other boys could watch as Jack and Bam finished off the three teachers. But they could hear it. It sounded like men at work mending a road.

At last Jack came back over to the chapel.

'Get them out of there,' he snapped, flinging the bloody iron bar aside.

Those who were strong enough began feverishly dragging boys out into the air, carrying them by their hands and feet. As soon as they dumped one on the grass they went back for another. As the limp figures drew clean air into their lungs they started to stir and wake up. Some just lay there groaning. Others sat against the gravestones of long-dead masters and churchmen, groggy, pale and confused. One boy tried to stand, then collapsed to his knees and was sick on to the ground.

Having made sure Malik was OK, Ed went back to find Matt, the boy who had led them all into the church. He discovered him curled up beneath the altar, one arm stretched out stiffly as if reaching for something. Clutched in his other hand was a sheaf of half-charred pages that had been torn from a book, a Bible by the look of it.

Ed slapped his face gently. Matt didn't respond, so he slipped his arms around his chest ready to lift him. As he did so Matt suddenly came awake. He gripped hold of Ed with claw-like hands and looked up into his eyes.

'I've seen him,' he said.

'It's all right, we've got you now,' said Ed.

'I've seen him.'

'Who have you seen, mate?'

'The Lamb. The Lamb is going to save us all.'

'That's good to know,' said Ed, humouring him while still trying to get him on to his feet.

'He came in a cloud of golden light, his shadow behind him. The Lamb. He's going to save us all. We have to prepare for his coming.'

Bam came over to help and they propped Matt up under each armpit and walked him outside, Matt babbling all the way, none of it making any sense.

They lowered him on to a bench in the graveyard and checked to make sure no more teachers had turned up.

It looked like the aftermath of a battle, or a gas attack. The boys from the church lay among the gravestones, puking and moaning, clutching their sides in agony. At least they seemed to be recovering, though.

The Sullivan brothers were the last out, carrying a skinny young lad between them. They gently put him down away from the others and Anthony approached Ed and Bam.

'I think you should come and look at this one,' he said. 'He won't wake up.'

The little boy's face was chalk white, his lips slightly blue. Ed listened to his chest and peeled back his eyelids, then tried mouth to mouth, but there was no response. He was dead.

'His name was Jacob.' Malik had revived enough to make his way

over to where a group of boys were huddled with Ed round the dead kid.

'He wasn't well before,' Malik went on. 'He had asthma, and his inhaler had run out.'

'Poor little guy,' said Bam. 'What are we going to do with him?'

'We can't leave him out here. He'll be eaten,' said Anthony matter-of-factly.

'But if we take him inside he'll start to … you know … smell …' said Damien Sullivan, looking at his brother.

'We're in a graveyard, aren't we?' said Jack. 'We'll bury him.'

'The Lamb has taken him.'

Everyone turned round. Matt was standing there, wrapped in a blanket, a strange drunken smile on his face.

'Taken him for his army,' Matt went on. 'Don't feel sad for him. The Lamb is going to save us all!'

8

‘It was cold in there at night. We couldn’t get warm, so we broke up a couple of the pews and used the wood for a fire.’ Ed’s friend Malik was sitting on a bench drinking from a plastic bottle of water. His eyes were weepy and bloodshot and his hand was shaking. Ed was standing nearby, keeping watch for any teachers.

‘I guess the smoke and fumes must have built up without us realizing,’ Malik went on, his voice hoarse.

‘You’re lucky you’re not all dead.’ Ed relaxed and sat down next to Malik. ‘Carbon monoxide will kill you.’

‘I *feel* like death.’ Malik offered Ed a sickly grin. ‘I think my head’s going to explode. And you want to watch out – I might spew at any second. Just don’t ask me to stand up for at least three days. I’m dizzy enough just sitting here.’

‘You might have to stand, Malik.’ Ed was still scanning the road. ‘We’re all right at the moment, but it’s only a matter of time before more of the teachers work out where we are and come sniffing around.’

‘I guess if it’s a matter of life and death I’ll make it inside.’ Malik groaned, and he sank his head down between his knees, supported by his shaking hands. ‘Do you know if carbon monoxide can give you any permanent damage?’

‘No idea,’ said Ed. ‘Wiki’s the one to ask.’

Malik made a face. ‘I don’t want, like, brain damage or something.’

Ed punched him lightly in the shoulder. ‘Wouldn’t notice the difference,’ he said. ‘But, seriously, what’s happened to Matt? Talk about brain damage. He’s still coming out with totally random stuff.’

Malik let out his breath slowly and noisily then laughed through his nose.

'I think he's found God,' he said.

'In a big way.' Ed laughed as well now. 'Was he a religious nut before?'

'Not that I know of,' said Malik. 'But stuck in there …' He nodded back over his shoulder to the chapel. 'All we had to read was Bibles and prayer books. You know Archie Bishop?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, one night he said we should all pray.'

'He always was a bit like that,' Ed interrupted. 'His dad was a vicar or something, I think.'

'Well, I'm a Muslim, as you know,' said Malik. 'So I pray every day anyway, at least I'm supposed to. So there we all were inside. I prayed to my God and they prayed to theirs. Even those kids who didn't believe in anything much before got in on it. It sort of held us all together in a funny way. And Matt seemed to really get into it. Started reading out bits of the Bible from the, you know, like, the pulpit thing. I didn't understand most of it and I don't think he did either.'

'What's all this stuff about the Lamb?' Ed asked. 'Where did that come from?'

'Well, the thing was, as I say, it got really cold in there,' said Malik, 'and we'd started making these, like, fires, using anything we could find, pages from the prayer books and old Bibles and whatever to get it going. Then last night Matt, like, totally freaked out, said we shouldn't burn any more of the books, and he rescued a lot of pages from the burner we'd made, found us some charcoal instead. Bad idea. By the time we realized we were all being poisoned by the fumes it was too late – we were all passing out.'

'Lucky we came over when we did.'

'Too right,' said Malik. 'I was heading into the light, halfway to paradise. When you woke me up I thought you were God!'

Ed laughed, then Malik went on more seriously. 'I reckon Matt's flipped,' he said. 'Can't blame him. It's been tough on all of us. Our food ran out three days ago, though we still had some water. I reckon we've all been seeing things, and Matt … Well, Matt seems to think he's some kind of prophet or something now.'

'Let's hope he doesn't freak any of the other kids out,' said Ed.

'Too late for that,' said Malik, rubbing his temples. 'He's already got the younger kids following him around. We call them his acolytes. And Archie Bishop's become his, like, second in command.'

Ed hauled himself up off the bench. 'I'm going to go and see if he's all right.'

Matt was sitting by himself away from the other kids. He was a tall boy of Ed's age with very little flesh on his bones. He was all angles and lumps, knobbly knees and elbows, sharp shoulders, pointy chin and big nose. His usually very tidy hair was starting to grow wild. His skin looked grey. His eyes, sunk deep in purple sockets above high cheekbones, were bleary and unfocused.

Ed flopped down next to him.

'How you doing?'

'Better than ever.' Matt smiled that weird spooky smile of his again. Maybe he thought he looked angelic; to Ed he just looked creepy.

'That's good. Listen, the reason we came over to the chapel to find you is we don't think we can stay here any longer. We need to find somewhere where there's food and water and we, you know, we figured we should all stick together.'

'Yes,' said Matt, and his face broke into a huge radiant smile. 'You've seen it too?'

'Seen what?'

'The vision.'

Ed shook his head. 'I haven't seen any visions, Matt.'

Matt clutched Ed's arm, his fingers digging into the soft flesh. 'I saw it. I saw it really clearly.'

'Saw what?'

'A big church in London, bigger than any real church, as big as the whole city, with thousands and thousands of children inside it. Like an ants' nest. It was shining, the dome of the church was shining, and the Lamb was there. We have to be there to meet him.'

'Meet the Lamb?'

'Yes. He'll look after us, and watch over us, as long as we follow him and follow what he's shown me, in the vision …'

'You had a vision of a lamb telling you to go to London?'

'Yes. It was so clear, and it's all written here.' Matt held up the torn and charred pages he'd been clutching when Ed had rescued him. Thrust them right into Ed's face. Ed tried to get up, but Matt still held on to him with his other hand.

'Listen,' he said, and began to read. '*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.* Don't you understand? He's left us a message, a new message. It was hidden in the pages of the old Bible, in the words, but this is a new message.'

Ed tried not to laugh. 'I don't get it,' he said, frowning at the grubby sheaf of papers. 'What sort of message?'

‘I don’t understand it all,’ said Matt, and he finally let go of Ed so that he could sort through the pages. ‘Not yet, but I’m working on it. I need to study the pages. Look, you see, the meaning has changed … I need to get them in order. Some of the words have been burned away …’

He waved a page at Ed.

‘See this one here … *First begotten of the dead. Keeper of the keys of hell and death* … no, that’s not the bit I meant, here, yes … *Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go, pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.” The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image.* Do you see? It’s all in here. The disease, everything. It was all meant to be.’ Matt squinted at the lines of print and read out another passage. ‘*Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done*.’

‘Yeah, look, Matt, I don’t really get all this stuff. I’m not even sure I know what repenting is.’

‘The dead will rise again, Ed, but only the Lamb can save us.’

‘So you’re saying Jesus will look after us?’

‘No … Not Jesus, the Lamb.’

‘I thought the Lamb was Jesus.’

‘No … The Lamb is something new, a new kind of prophet, or a new God.’

‘You sound a bit confused about this, Matt.’

‘No. I saw him. I saw him clearly.’

‘Yeah? What did he look like, then, this Lamb?’

‘He was one of us … a boy, a child, even younger. With golden hair. A child who isn’t a child. In the vision I saw, he was walking out of the darkness, and all around him was light, and in his shadow walked a demon.’

‘A demon?’

‘Yes, yes … I think so, but he was in darkness.’

‘What sort of demon?’

‘He was in the form of a child as well, but dark-faced where the Lamb was alight. He was in shadow. They’re like two sides of the same coin, heads and tails, yin and yang.’

‘Batman and Robin.’ Ed stood up and brushed his jeans clean.

‘Don’t make a joke of it, Ed, don’t take the piss.’

‘Matt, I can’t take any of this seriously. How can I? People don’t have visions.’

Now Matt stood, confronting Ed, standing too close. ‘We know hardly anything about the world, Ed. Isn’t that clear? Isn’t that really

bloody clear now? Six months ago if someone had said to you that everyone over the age of fourteen would either die or turn into a zombie you'd have laughed at them. Wouldn't you?'

'Yeah, but …'

'These are strange new times,' said Matt. 'But it was all there, in the pages of the Bible. We just had to be shown it properly. We have to prepare. First there's the plague, then the fire, then the river of blood, and then –'

'All right. All right.' Ed put up his hands in surrender. 'I won't laugh at you, Matt. Just', maybe, keep this to yourself, though, yeah?'

'No, Ed, no!' In his excitement Matt was spitting. 'You have to listen to me. Everyone has to listen to me. We have to go to London! If you aren't there to welcome the Lamb, you'll be struck down like the other sinners.'

'Maybe we don't all want to go to London!'

'I'm going to London.' While they'd been arguing Jack had come over and had been listening in on their conversation. Now he stepped in between the two of them, keeping them apart.

'I'll go with you, Matt, at least as far as south London.'

'Jack, we all need to stick together.' Ed was trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. 'It'd be crazy to go to London. There'll be more food and water in the countryside.'

Jack shrugged. 'I just want to go home.'

'But there'll be nothing there, Jack.'

'I don't care. I want to see my own home, my old bedroom. Get some of my old things, family photos; all my memories are there. I can't just let it all go.'

'Jack, I thought we'd all decided last night,' Ed pleaded. 'We have to have a plan. And our plan was to go into the countryside. We have to stick together and we have to have a plan.'

'I have got a plan,' said Jack. 'I'm going home.'

9

Chris Marker opened his book to the page with the corner he'd folded back. He found that he could stop anywhere in a chapter and start up again at the exact same point without ever having to go back and check anything. He never had to remind himself what was going on. It was as if there'd been no break between when he stopped reading and when he started again. In a funny way the story he was reading became the real world for him, more alive than the world he found himself in when he lifted his eyes from the page, blinking and lost. Real life was nothing more than a tiny interruption to his reading.

The kids were all assembled in the church and they were talking, talking, talking. A repeat of last night in the dormitory … '*we have to stick together, we need to find food and water, we should go to London, we should go into the countryside, we should go to the moon, blah blah blah …*'

Just so much talk. What difference did any of it make?

He heard a sniffle and a sob and looked along the pew. The French girl, Frédérique, was sitting there with Johnno the rugby player, her cat-carrying box held tight in her lap. She hadn't spoken since they'd arrived at the chapel, but seemed happy for Johnno to look after her.

There were raised voices and Chris looked to the front. Jack and Ed were arguing with each other again. Chris shook his head. Tried not to smile. He wondered if Jack was ever going to tell Frédérique that he'd nailed a plank of wood to her father's head.

They were very different, Jack and Ed. Ed, the poster boy for the school. He'd never had to worry about anything much before all this. Now he looked tired and scared all the time. Jack, whose strawberry

birthmark had always made him look a bit angry and who now really did seem to be in a permanent bad mood. Shorter than Ed, with darker hair, he had the feel about him of someone who wanted to start a fight.

Look at the two of them. Trying to take charge, to be in control. They were only fourteen years old. They were children. They were *all* only children. And out there … outside the chapel …

Chris didn't want to think about that.

Now Anthony Sullivan joined in.

'How far is it?' he asked. 'To London? How long would it take to get there?'

'About twenty-five miles, I think,' Jack answered. 'Same distance as a marathon.'

'It's twenty-one miles to Trafalgar Square,' said Wiki. 'So at an average human walking speed of three miles an hour, that would be roughly a seven-hour walk, if you did it in one go.'

'What time is it now?' Anthony Sullivan asked.

'Quarter to eleven,' said Matt. 'We could be there by six o'clock.'

'Provided there are no delays,' Ed butted in. 'You make it sound like it's a stroll in the park, lah-di-dah-di-dah, let's all skip to London and take in the sights from the top of an open-topped bus. We don't know what's out there. If you go to London, you might be having to fight every step of the way.'

'You don't know it's going to be any easier going to the countryside,' said Jack.

'I've never liked London,' said Bam. 'I grew up in the country.'

'You're a yokel, Bam,' said his friend Piers, and Bam grinned.

'Ooh arr!' he said, and the little kids laughed.

'I'm with Bam,' Piers added. 'I vote we go to the countryside.'

Chris stayed with his head bent over his book.

He wasn't going to get involved in any stupid voting. He'd go along with whatever the others decided. As long as he had some books with him, he'd be all right. He had a sack-load he'd looted from the school library. There'd be other libraries, bookshops, houses with bookshelves, a world of books …

He'd always loved reading. Even before the disease, he'd retreated to the safety of stories. Books were a gateway into an alternative universe. They were magic. A book could hold anything inside it.

A book could hide Chris inside it.

He turned a page. He was reading a science-fiction adventure called *Fever Crumb*, set in London hundreds of years in the future. He found that reassuring. That there would still be something here in the future, that the world wasn't about to end.

He smiled.

He was there, inside the book, walking the streets of London, living in the future city.

And he was happy there.

10

The wintry sky was a great slab of unbroken grey. The flat light made Rowhurst look like a picture laid out below him, not a real town at all. From up here on the church tower Jack had a clear view of the high street, and the main school buildings over the road. He was leaning on the battlements, wrapped in his coat to keep out the cold. A thin biting wind was carrying drizzle that settled on his hair and face and kept trying to run down the back of his neck.

The rain was staining the grey stonework of the school with dark, blotchy patches. The place had been founded four hundred years ago, but only a couple of buildings from that time remained. Most of the rest had been built in the nineteenth century in a grand, heavy and, quite frankly, ugly style. A row of black railings ran along the front, broken by the wrought-iron gates with the school's name in gothic letters across the top. Boys had been going in and out of those gates for nearly a hundred and fifty years. Too many boys to count. Jack wondered if any boys would ever come back here. Would this place ever be a school again? Or would the buildings slowly crumble and decay, split open by wind and rain and frost and the searching roots of trees and weeds? He'd never really enjoyed school that much. He'd struggled in lessons, his parents had hired a string of tutors to get him past the entrance exam and he'd always felt that he was never going to catch up with the other boys in his classes.

Rowhurst had been his dad's old school. Dad had been very happy there and still kept in touch with his old school friends …

No. Not any more. Jack had to keep reminding himself that that world didn't exist any more. The world of school reunions and dads going off on 'boys' weekends', fishing and bike riding and whisky

tasting.

Welcome to hell.

A cold, grey hell.

In a funny way, Jack was going to miss school, though. It had been such a big part of his life and if you didn't count the lessons he'd probably got a lot out of it. He'd made some good friends. He'd enjoyed the sports. He'd been a good all-rounder – football, running, tennis, cricket, swimming. Plus he'd liked acting in the school plays. He could cover over his birthmark with make-up, pull on a wig and a costume, and pretend to be someone else. He'd enjoyed playing villains most. He'd been Iago in a production of *Othello*. Kwanele had played the main part – he was the only black boy in the school. Kwanele was a bit camp and hammy as an actor, and almost turned the play into a comedy, but audiences loved him and he had definite star quality. Everyone agreed that Jack's scenes with him were the best thing in the play, and were the best theatre the school had ever seen.

Ed had taken a small part, for a laugh, but he couldn't act to save his life. He just couldn't be anything other than himself. Good old Ed Carter. He was self-conscious and couldn't stop grinning in embarrassment.

Memories. That's all Jack had left now. That's all the school would become, a memory, kept alive by however many boys survived. Would Jack one day tell stories of his schooldays to his own son as they huddled in the dark in some ruined building eating rats and drinking polluted water?

Ah, yes, son, the best years of my life …

Which they probably would be, of course. He couldn't see his life exactly improving from here on in.

Memories. You had to hang on to your memories somehow. That's why he wanted to get home – to try to grab a corner of the past and hang on to it.

He spat over the battlements, watching the spitball fall with the rain.

He certainly wouldn't ever forget the school. Not after all that had happened here in the last few weeks. How many teachers had he killed, he wondered.

He hadn't been counting.

Home, though, was a small precious memory that seemed to be slowly fading. A magical lost place. A place where the old Jack lived. The one who rode a bike and argued with his mum and dad and watched TV and spent hours on the Internet.

Very different to the new Jack, the one who cracked open the skulls of teachers and buried dead kids.

He was going to go back there, no matter what it took.

He'd come up to the top of the tower to take a last look around. See what might be waiting for him out there. The view was pretty good. He could see most of the school and a fair part of the town. The high street was the main route in and out and he had a clear view along it in both directions.

The town looked quiet and peaceful from up here. If the sun had been shining, it might have been the picture on the box of a jigsaw puzzle. A typical small town in Kent with the sort of houses that children drew, redbrick, pointy roofs, chimneys. If you didn't know, you would have no idea of the horrors that were going on all around you. If you looked closely, though, you could spot a couple of burnt-out buildings, abandoned cars all over the roads. A dead body lying in the gutter. So far he hadn't seen another living soul since he'd climbed up here, though. The diseased grown-ups tended to stay inside when it was light. But they were there. Hundreds of them, thousands …

It couldn't be any worse in London.

Jack looked north, in the rough direction he imagined his family home in Clapham to be. What lay between here and there? He wanted to get moving and find somewhere to sleep before it got dark.

'Is it all clear?'

Ed had come up the stairs and out of the little turret in the corner of the roof.

'Looks OK,' said Jack. 'You sure you don't want to change your mind? Come with me? Whatever happened to the idea that we were going to stick together no matter what?'

'There's nothing for me in London, Jack.'

Jack felt like saying that there was *me*, your best friend, *Jack*, but kept his mouth shut. Their friendship had become difficult lately; maybe it was time they went different ways.

'I just think there's a better chance of survival in the countryside,' Ed said. 'It seems crazy to me to go into town.'

Jack shrugged. 'Maybe in London they're having twenty-four-hour parties with no adults telling them when to go to bed.'

Ed smiled. 'Maybe.'

'You'll be all right,' said Jack. 'You've got Bam and all the rest. Bam knows how to take care of himself. You stick with him you'll be fine.' Jack didn't say it, but he knew that that was what had decided it for Ed. He was going to keep close to Bam and the rugby players. Jack couldn't blame him. Survival was everything now. Stronger than old friendships even.

He smiled and gave Ed a quick, awkward hug.

'Take care.'

'Yeah.'

‘How does that song go? “I will survive”?’

‘Yeah.’

Ed looked in pain, like he was struggling to say something. Whatever it was he didn’t say it. They were both keeping their secrets to themselves.

That was how to survive.

What was the point of survival, though, if you became an animal? Scrounging for food, fighting, killing to stay alive? Jack’s house, and all it contained, had become something special in his mind. Because what it contained was what made him human. He couldn’t explain that to Ed. He wasn’t sure he even understood it himself. He would never have had spacey thoughts like this before. Somehow, being close to death made you go deeper into your mind. Either that or you did what Bam did, shut your mind down, didn’t think about anything, treated it all as a big joke.

Jack moved to the stairs.

‘Please come with us,’ Ed pleaded. ‘Please, Jack.’

‘My mind’s made up.’

‘You always were a stubborn bugger.’

‘Always will be. Now I’ve got to go.’

11

Jack had put that song in his head and now he wasn't around to suffer the awful singing. Ed had started it and now they were all belting it out, as they tramped along through the drizzle in a straggly crocodile, for all the world like an unruly bunch of primary-school kids on a trip.

Problem was, nobody really knew the words.

'I will survive … da da da daa …'

Ed wondered if they would have been better off keeping quiet and not attracting attention to themselves, but singing seemed to keep the shadows away, it gave them courage. As long as they were singing, they were invincible.

'I will survive … da da da daa …'

They were marching south, out of the town, leaving the school and the church behind. None of them had been out of the grounds in at least the last five weeks. For a while the town had been chaos, the streets overrun with crazies. Now the boys were goggle-eyed at how deserted everywhere was. The shops that had always been busy stood open-doored and empty, ransacked of all their stock. The houses were dark, lifeless and neglected, with rubbish piled in the gardens. Offices were silent. Cars stationary. The only sign of life was when a dog ran out and barked at them. The shock had made them all jump but after a moment's panic they'd burst out laughing and had mocked each other for what a bunch of wimps they'd been. The dog was still tagging along behind, keeping a wary distance. It was skinny and scabby, with patches of fur missing.

But so far they'd seen no other people. Living or dead. They'd made it to the outskirts of the town. The shops had mostly given way to houses and small businesses. They passed a doctor's surgery; a

dentist; the local pub, the Hop Sack, its windows blackened by fire. There was a big Tesco up ahead and, after that, beyond the common, was 'Futures Enterprise Zone', known by the locals as 'The Fez', an ugly modern retail and industrial park, whose main occupants were a carpet warehouse and a tool-hire company.

Arthur and Wiki were walking along with a boy called Stanley, who had been part of the chapel group. They were having an intense conversation about whether you got wetter walking or running.

'Scientifically, the less time you spend in the rain, the less wet you'll get,' Wiki was explaining. 'So you're better off running. As long as you're running towards a shelter.'

'We had floods last year,' said Arthur, 'at home. It rained really hard for two days and nights and the river burst its banks, it was like the streets had become a river, you had to use boats to get anywhere, it was really fun, and I thought it would be probably the most exciting thing that was ever going to happen in my life, you know, like a disaster movie, you see them in the cinema and you think, that looks incredible, but it's never going to happen to me, because, mostly, living in England it used to be pretty boring, not any more, though, this is more extreme than a flood, much more, it's maybe not as cool as a flood, and it's more, you know, terrifying, but it is like a real disaster movie, and I never thought that was going to happen.'

When they got to Tesco, they stopped to take a look, but the place had been cleaned out and set on fire. All the food and drink had been looted from the petrol station next to it as well, but there were a few useful items still on the shelves, torches, cigarette lighters, batteries and a stack of road atlases.

Bam opened one out on the counter.

'Look,' he said, pointing to the map with a stubby finger. 'This is us, here, in Rowhurst. We're going this way, south-west, past The Fez. After that there are fewer and fewer buildings and then we'll start to be in the countryside. Not proper countryside, though, still lots of town and villages and whatnot. We'll need to go more west to this open area here towards Sevenoaks and Maidstone. That's proper farmland, that is. We'll get a pretty decent idea of what to expect once we're there. And it's near enough to some major towns if we decide the country life isn't for us after all.'

'Looks like a plan,' said Ed.

When they got outside, they found the group of boys from Field House were throwing bricks at a glossy black Mercedes that had been left in the car park. They were trying to break the windscreen, but so far the bricks were just bouncing off.

'Stand aside!' said Bam, and he picked up a huge block of masonry.

He ran at the car and hefted his missile at it with a grunt.

This time the glass shattered and the boys cheered.

The bang had seemed startlingly loud, as did the wailing alarm that followed it. It shrieked for about thirty seconds then stopped.

The silence that followed was perhaps even more extreme. There were no angry shouts from adults, no sound of traffic, no aeroplanes overhead, no music …

The boys too were quiet. Thoughtful. They were in a world of silence now, something that none of them had ever really known before. The comforting hum and buzz of civilization had ceased.

'Come on,' Bam shouted. 'Let's hear some noise! What's happened to the singing? We're on the road, a band-of-brothers, team effort and all that! How about a group hug before we go?'

'What?' Ed looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

'Joke. OK?' said Bam, laughing. 'Don't lose your sense of humour, Ed me old mate. Now *ándale*, *ándale*! Let's get motoring.'

As they marched off singing the car alarm started up again as if cheering them on.

12

Jack was trudging along in the opposite direction out of town, wondering if he'd made the right decision. Apart from Matt and Archie Bishop and their six young acolytes nobody else had come with him and he was beginning to feel very alone.

Matt wouldn't shut up. He seemed to be able to talk tirelessly about his new religion. Spouting a non-stop stream of babble. To make it worse, if he ever paused, one of the acolytes would ask him a question and he'd be off again.

He was droning on now about what they could expect when they got to London.

'… it will be changed by the Lamb to become a city of pure gold, as pure as glass, like transparent glass with twelve gates made of pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. You see? And there will be food, more food than we can eat, and clean water.'

'But won't it be hard to get there?' asked Phil, the smallest acolyte.

'The Lamb will test us,' said Matt, and he scrabbled through his scorched pages for a couple of minutes before he found the passage he was looking for. '*The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sea turned into blood, and a third of the ships were destroyed*. You see, we'll have to go through fire, and rivers of blood.'

'And a shipwreck?' asked another acolyte.

'Maybe.'

'That sounds a bit scary,' said Phil. 'This is all a bit too real. It was

all right in the chapel. I don't like it out here. It's like a ghost town.'

'*Do not be afraid*,' said Matt, quoting again. '*I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades*. You see? The Lamb will look after us.'

Jack sighed. He didn't have an iPod he could plug into his ears. The battery had long ago died on him. He wasn't sure he could put up with seven hours of this.

13

Ed was walking along with Malik and Bam. Bam as cheerful as ever. It seemed that not even the rain could spoil his good mood.

'Don't you ever get miserable, Bam?' Ed asked.

'Nope.'

'Or scared?'

'Nope.'

'Why not? What's your secret?'

'I have no imagination,' Bam said in a very matter-of-fact way. 'Never have done. Never will. Works just fine for me.'

'Do you think we're doing the right thing?' Ed said quietly. 'Going to the countryside and everything?'

'God knows,' said Bam. 'Just don't think about it, mate. Onwards and upwards and outwards!' With that Bam gave Ed a hefty slap on the back and strode off to catch up with his friend Piers.

'You worry about things, don't you, Ed?' said Malik. 'You never used to.'

'There's a lot to worry *about*.'

'We're going to be all right, Ed. We'll find a barn to sleep in. A river to drink from. Maybe there'll be cows we can milk, sheep and chickens.'

'Pigs,' Ed added.

'Technically I'm not supposed to eat pork,' said Malik. 'But I guess God might let me off if I'm just trying to stay alive.'

'It'll be like going back to Victorian times,' said Ed. 'We can set up a sort of commune.'

'We'll need to find some girls,' said Malik.

'What, you mean to clean and cook?'

‘No.’ Malik shook his head in exasperation. ‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘All right, don’t sound so misunderstood, Malik,’ Ed protested. ‘I know what your lot are like when it comes to women – keeping them in the home doing the housework and all that.’

‘We’re not all like that, Ed. Just like you Christians aren’t all the same.’

‘I’m not sure I am a Christian,’ Ed said.

‘Whatever.’ Malik shrugged. ‘I meant we’ll need to find some girls if we want to start repopulating the world.’

‘Fair point. We’ve got Frédérique for a start. We’ll find others. Nice country wenches.’

‘Let’s hope we can persuade them to join us,’ said Malik. ‘I don’t know that much about girls.’

‘Do you ever wish you’d gone to a mixed-sex school?’ Ed asked.

‘My parents would never have allowed it,’ said Malik. ‘They’re not that strict Muslims, but there are some things they’re quite old-fashioned about.’

‘They don’t know about that girlfriend you had that time?’

‘No way.’

‘Whatever happened to her, anyway?’

‘She dumped me for an older boy,’ said Malik. ‘He had his own car and everything. Plus he didn’t have any pesky Muslim hang-ups.’

‘How very shallow,’ said Ed, putting on a nasal nerdy voice.

‘Indeed,’ said Malik, copying the voice. ‘How very shallow.’

Johnno the rugby player was walking next to Frédérique, trying to get her to come out of her shell. She plodded along, head bent forward, hair hanging down like a veil. All Johnno could see of her face was the tip of her long nose, but he could tell that she was still miserable. Her shoulders were slumped and she barely lifted her feet as she walked, as if each step was a huge effort.

He tried asking her about her cat, about France, about her school, but he could get nothing out of her, not even a grunt. In the end he told her about himself. He thought at least it might distract her. He told her how he had grown up in Dover. How his dad worked for the customs department at the ferry port. How he had two sisters, his parents were divorced and he’d got into the school on a sports scholarship. He explained how he lived for rugger. The French played rugger too, so he thought she might be interested in that, even though in his experience girls weren’t really that much into rugger.

‘I’m into music as well,’ he said. ‘It’s not just rugger. I don’t much like indie music, though, and hate R&B. I like anything LOUD.’

He couldn’t remember when he’d last heard any music. You

needed electricity to hear anything. Had all the music in the world just disappeared along with the power? What a weird idea, to think that there would be no more AC/DC, no more Led Zep and Nirvana and the Rolling Stones and the Stone Roses …

Best not say anything about all that to Frédérique; he was meant to be cheering her up, wasn't he? He'd only bring her down even further if he started to point out all the things that no longer existed because there wasn't any electricity.

The Internet, music, TV, films …

Bloody hell.

They were coming up to the Futures Enterprise Zone – The Fez. A modern development of low brick buildings each with its own parking area in front.

Bam caught up with Johnno.

'I've been thinking,' he said.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?' Johnno asked with a grin.

'Ha, ha, laughed the man,' said Bam. 'No, listen, there's that tool-hire place in The Fez. We should check it out. We could really get tooled up, if you'll pardon the pun. Most of us have still only got bits of broken bed and sticks. There'll be axes in there, crowbars … *chainsaws.*'

He said 'chainsaws' with such relish that Johnno smiled.

'Might be worth a look,' he said.

'Come on then.'

Bam spread the news and they veered off the road into The Fez, which looked as deserted as everywhere else in Rowhurst.

They passed the carpet warehouse and there ahead of them was the tool-hire shop. It looked untouched, though there was evidence of fire damage to the laminating factory to the right. The steel shutter over the loading bay was rolled up and inside it was blackened and sooty.

Ed and Malik were in the middle of the party, still discussing girls. Not really paying much attention to where they were.

'We've got to think practically,' Malik was saying. 'We need to make sure the human race doesn't die out. It's hard to imagine – but us lot, we're the future.'

Ed looked around at the others. 'It's not much of a future, is it? A bunch of public school boys and a girl with a cat in a box.'

'We'll find other kids,' said Malik. 'We can't be the only ones who've survived.'

'Well, it's certainly looking that way so far,' said Ed.

'No,' said Malik. 'You'll see. For the first time in weeks I'm starting to feel positive. Not too positive, mind, let's not get carried away here, but I really think that –'

Malik was gone.

One second Ed was talking to him, and the next …

It took Ed a moment to process the information, to make sense of what he'd seen – the brief flash of a face in the darkness of the factory doorway, a white face with black eyes and yellow teeth, two hands reaching towards Malik's neck.

He'd been pulled inside.

Before Ed had time to shout, to warn the others, bodies erupted from all around, from out of the doorway, from the gaps between buildings, from behind them, moving fast, hitting the boys hard.

There were screams coming from all around Ed now. And everywhere he turned there was a confused melee of writhing shapes.

What shall I do? What shall I do?

Malik was in the building. His friend, Malik. Ed made a half-hearted move towards the doorway, and saw in the dim interior about ten of them, three or four crouched over Malik's body, the others coming straight for him, charging out of the gloom. Ed backed away and the figures exploded into the daylight, arms flailing, teeth bared.

Teenagers. Boys and girls. They looked to be about seventeen or eighteen.

Ed turned and ran. Shouting to the other boys.

'Stay with me. Get away from here.' But he had no idea if anyone could hear him, if anyone could do anything.

He saw Johnno go down, with three or four teenagers on his back, another two pulling his arms and legs. The Field House boys were in a huddle, panicked. The three nerds were backed up against a wall, sobbing.

The teenagers were faster and stronger and more brutal than the older teachers from the school. They were filthy, their clothes stained with blood and worse. Some wore hoodies, some were wearing only T-shirts, others were so ragged it was hard to tell what they were wearing – their clothes hung off them in tatters. A few were nearly naked, their bodies a mess of wounds and pus-filled boils. One or two of them were older boys from the school, wearing suits. Ed recognized a prefect. He'd lost most of his hair and one eye and looked more like an animal than a human now. He had a smaller kid, Stanley, one of the boys from the chapel that Ed remembered carrying out into the fresh air only an hour ago. The prefect was swinging him round by one arm, his face blank and emotionless.

And all the while the rain fell in a steady monotonous drizzle. It was a dull, damp, grey day. A typical English day. Boring and flat. A day for staying indoors and waiting for tomorrow. And here they were, dying on this dreary industrial estate.

Ed spotted Frédérique, still hanging on to her cat carrier. She was

standing frozen, staring a hundred miles into the distance, while the fight raged around her. He grabbed her and pulled her away from where four teenagers had Johnno on the ground and were trying to bite his stomach. Then Ed saw Wiki and Arthur, cowering behind a pile of boxes. Ed grabbed Wiki and hoped that Arthur would follow.

'We have to get away from here,' he shouted, but there was nowhere to run. Wherever they turned there were more of the older kids.

Ed dragged his gang towards the Sullivan brothers, who had made it back to the road and were holding out, fighting back clumsily but effectively with garden spades. There were just too many of the teenagers, though, and before Ed got to the brothers he watched helplessly as a fat teenager got Anthony from behind and sank her teeth into his neck. Anthony yelled and clutched at the wound, dropping the spade. Instantly two more were on him, girls with maniac twisted faces covered in spots and blisters.

Damien tried to batter the girls off his brother, but he was overpowered by a mob of bigger boys and he went down struggling and cursing.

Ed switched direction and bumped into someone running the other way. He went sprawling, pulling Frédérique and Wiki down with him. He let go of them and rolled to his feet. Both Sullivan brothers were on the ground now and it didn't look like they'd be getting up again. And there was one of the Field House boys, trying to run with two girls on his back and another with her arms round one leg. He fell over with a yell.

Ed made it out of the estate and into the road but was knocked over again and ended up with someone on top of him. He laid into them desperately with knees and elbows.

'Ow, stop it!' It was one of the nerds, his shirt torn half off his back. Ed apologized and they helped each other up. The nerd – Justin – picked up a bit of bed frame that had been dropped by a rugby player and started lashing out around him in a blind, red-faced fury, keeping the circling teenagers at bay.

Ed looked around for Frédérique and the younger boys. Wiki and Arthur had disappeared but Frédérique was standing frozen again. A slobbering, wet-faced teenager was crouched in front of her, sniffing her, his head moving up and down her body. For some reason he wasn't attacking her, maybe because she was standing so still he couldn't tell if she was alive.

Wasn't that what you were supposed to do if you were attacked by a bear? Play dead?

Whatever, the teenager was just dribbling and sniffing and Frédérique wasn't moving.

Ed had just enough time to register this before he was flattened again. And no sooner was he up than he was down once more. There was such a confusion of sprawling bodies that he couldn't remain standing for more than a few seconds at a time. Sometimes he was knocked over by the older kids; sometimes it was one of his friends from school.

He was weeping in fear and rage and frustration.

He didn't want to die. Not here. Not like this …

14

As he walked, Jack constantly scanned his surroundings, keeping alert for any movement, any signs of danger. It felt very strange being out on the streets after all those long days cooped up in the school and he had had no idea how dangerous the outside world was now. There were signs of violence. They'd seen wrecked shops and a few dead bodies, but so far no living ones. No kids, no adults. Nothing. Just a dreary parade of boring houses sitting grey and damp in the rain. Matt and Archie were so absorbed in their conversation about the Lamb that they seemed to have completely forgotten that they might be in any danger at all. That wasn't clever of them. The sudden attack that came from nowhere was the most devastating. You had to be prepared.

Jack wanted to scream at the boys to shut up and pay attention, but feared that they would only try to involve him in their discussion. There was no way of getting through to Matt – he was utterly obsessed. He really seemed to think that the Lamb, whatever the hell that was, would protect him from anything.

He was reciting something by heart as he walked, without needing to look at the pages, which he'd put away to protect from the rain.

'*I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death*.'

'Will it be clear when we meet the Lamb what it is?' asked one of the younger boys. 'What will it look like?'

'Not it,' said Matt. '*He*. The Lamb is a boy like us. His hair is golden. His face is white and shining, and he walks with a shadow.'

'You keep saying that, Matt, but what does it mean?' Archie Bishop asked. 'Surely we all walk with a shadow.'

‘The Lamb’s shadow is a living shadow, like a doppelganger.’

‘A what?’

‘It’s a fancy word for a double. It’s like his dark half, his dark brother. He’s a demon who speaks in tongues.’

‘My older brother, Robert, went on an Alpha Course,’ said Archie. ‘They speak in tongues. He did a bit for me. It sounded mad.’

‘Should *we* speak in tongues, do you think?’ Matt asked, getting excited.

‘We could try.’

‘How do you do it?’

‘Well, you just sort of let the spirit guide you and you sort of go, blah laa laa, baba babala laaa la la al ba ba ba blaaa …’

Matt joined in, going, ‘Blaa maa kaaa baa laaa …’ but soon broke down into helpless giggles.

‘We need to practise that a bit,’ he said.

The acolytes started up and soon all of them were chirruping away, laughing and spouting gibberish.

Great, thought Jack. *I’m on marathon walk to London, likely to be ambushed by diseased nutters at any moment and I’m stuck with a load of idiots who sound like they’ve escaped from the set of* In the Night Garden.

15

When he was eight, Ed had gone on a family holiday to the west coast of France. There had been signs everywhere reading CÔTE SAUVAGE, wild coast, and the waves had been huge. One day his dad had taken him out to brave them. It had been amazing, rising up on the swell, diving through the breakers, body surfing, but then one had taken him by surprise and knocked him off his feet.

It had been terrifying, being rolled over and over, not knowing which way was up or down, a hideous churning confusion of water and sand. Whenever his feet had found the bottom, they'd been whipped away and he'd been spun again, like being inside a giant washing machine.

At last his dad had grabbed him and pulled him up.

That's how it felt being in this fight. And his dad wasn't here to rescue him today. His dad would never be able to help him again. Winded once more against the hard concrete, he didn't have the strength to get up. He drew in a painful rasping breath, rolled on to his back, and the next thing he knew one of the teenagers was on him. A sharp-faced boy who looked to be about eighteen. It was hard to tell, though, because his eyes were bulging out of his head and his face resembled a margherita pizza, livid red with crusty yellow patches, like the worst case of teenage acne Ed had ever seen.

With a mad, terrified burst of energy Ed just managed to get his hands round the boy's neck and hold him off at arm's length.

The boy was snarling and snorting, which made green snot bubble from his nose. Pinkish-looking saliva foamed from between his rotten teeth, flecked with blood. It mingled with the snot and formed into a dribble that hung down like a rope, dangling over Ed's mouth. A drop

fell from the end and spattered on to Ed's lips. He jerked his head to the side and spat. More warm dribble pooled in his ear.

Ed shook his head.

The teenager looked horribly diseased. Ed didn't understand how the sickness worked, nobody did, but the thought of catching it off this drooling, pizza-faced git was horrifying.

He lay there on his back, arms straight out, squeezing the boy's neck and trying to keep him away at the same time. He had a horrible image of one of those rubber toy heads that when you squashed them the eyes and tongue popped out. The teenager had shorter arms. He couldn't quite reach Ed, but he scrabbled wildly at him, scratching his skin with dirty, black fingernails. Ed could do little to stop the crazed attack and he felt his arms shaking with the strain. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out.

And then the boy would fall on him and press that gaping mouth into Ed's face.

There was a shout – 'Look out, Ed!'

Out of the corner of his eye Ed saw Bam pounding over.

Bam shouted 'PUNT!' and Ed let go of the boy just as Bam swung his leg in a mighty drop-kick. His boot connected with the boy's head and sent him spinning over backwards. Ed scrambled to his feet and glanced at his attacker, who lay still for a moment then got to his knees and started to crawl about in circles, his head bent at a crazy angle. He appeared to be looking for something, and then Ed realized that the force of the kick had knocked one of his eyes out.

Ed felt faint and turned away to be sick. Bam caught him and held him up.

'No time for that, mate. Gotta keep moving.'

'I can't,' Ed sobbed. 'I can't. I can't do this.'

'Yes you can.'

Before Ed could say anything else a fresh group of teenagers jumped Bam and he was at the centre of a thrashing brawl, arms and legs working furiously to keep his attackers off him. He seemed to have lost his weapon and was fighting bare-handed.

Ed had nothing left. He was alone. Exhausted. Terrified. He was sick of the sight of blood. His ears were filled with the sound of screaming. He fell to his knees, looked up at the sky and opened his mouth wide, but his throat had closed, his vocal cords had gone tight and all that came out was a long hopeless, silent shout of despair.

And then the screams of the other boys were drowned out by a rumble and a roar. Something huge was approaching down the road, looming out of the misty rain like a breaching whale. There was the blast of a horn.

Two of the teenagers let go of Bam and turned to stare, dumbly.

They were flattened with a bone-breaking crunch.

Ed's lungs had stopped working altogether. His chest was gripped by bars of iron. It felt like his heart had stopped as well. He couldn't move or make sense of what was happening as the hulking leviathan headed straight for him where he knelt in the middle of the road.

16

With a final mighty hiss and a screech of metal scraping against metal the thing stopped, centimetres from Ed.

It was a bus. A bloody coach. A monster of a thing, two and a half metres wide and twice as high. White, with smoked windows. Ed could feel the heat coming off it.

It seemed so out of place here. A thing from the past. Ed wouldn't have been more surprised if a dragon had just landed snorting fire and smoke. He scrambled round to the side, half crawling, half running, and the passenger door opened with a sigh.

Ed froze.

There was a man in the driver's seat. Stocky and round-faced with a big head and close-cropped fair hair. Thirty-five, maybe forty – Ed was never very good at judging. The thing was, though – he was a man. An adult. The enemy.

'Get in!' he barked at Ed.

Was this a rescue or a trap? The man didn't look diseased, but that didn't mean anything. You couldn't trust any adults at all. And yet he was driving a coach. None of the other adults, whose brains had been rotted by the disease, could drive a coach. Most of them could hardly even walk.

'Get in, or I'm going.'

Before Ed could do or say anything Wiki and Arthur pushed past him and scurried up the steps, Chris Marker and Kwanele, still lugging his designer suitcase, followed hard on their heels.

Ed turned back to where the last survivors were still fighting.

'Get on the coach!' he screamed. 'Come on, quickly!'

He saw Frédérique and grabbed her again, almost throwing her up

the steps. Then he got hold of Justin, the nerd who had fallen on him earlier, and dragged him away from three vicious-looking teenage girls. Four boys from the chapel pushed past, then Bam came barrelling over with his arm round one of his rugby players. It was Piers, his red hair soaked with blood. Ed helped them on to the coach, but as he climbed on board himself he felt a hand close round his left ankle and tug him backwards. He fell painfully on the steps.

'Stay down!' the coach driver shouted, and Ed did as he was told.

There was a flash and a bang. Ed felt something skim over his head, brushing his hair, and whoever had hold of him let go. He looked up to see the driver pointing a shotgun out of the door, smoke rising from the end of its double barrels. Ed crawled up the rest of the way, the doors closing behind him, and the coach started to move.

He hauled himself to his feet and slumped into one of the front seats, too shattered to take another step. Every part of him felt bruised and battered.

'That's not everyone,' he croaked. 'There must be more?'

'I couldn't wait any longer, pal. Too risky by half,' said the driver. 'You'd better say goodbye to whoever you left behind.'

'We have to check. We have to make sure.'

'No, we don't. We have to get away from here.'

Ed felt the coach speed up. Heard the thump of bodies being hit.

'You're not safe yet, sunbeam,' said the driver, grimacing as he wrenched the wheel round, and the whole coach jolted and juddered as its wheels ran over something – or someone. 'Not till we've put this lot behind us.'

Ed twisted round in his seat and looked along the length of the coach – how many of them were missing? Half? More?

'Look out!' the driver yelled, and Ed turned back just in time to see a teenage girl squashed against the windscreen like a giant bug. The driver turned a switch and the wipers sped up, smearing pus and blood over the smoked glass.

'That's the last of them, I reckon. Looks like a clear run ahead.'

Ed was shivering. He pulled his knees up and huddled in a ball on the seat, trying to shut the world out. He looked at the man driving the coach. He had a thick slab of a body, with skinny legs and fat, muscled arms. He seemed fit and healthy. Ed should have been curious. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he not sick like all the others? But he couldn't care less. The man might as well have been someone in a film. A boring film about a coach driver.

There was a boy sitting quietly behind him. He looked like a smaller version of the driver – slightly fat, with a big round head and close-cropped hair. The only real difference, apart from the size, was that the boy wore a pair of wire-framed glasses.

The driver must be his dad.

Who cares? Who bloody cares?

The boy noticed Ed and gave him a shy smile.

Ed ignored him.

He closed his eyes. And the boy's smile was replaced by Malik's smiling face. Malik had one of those faces that always seemed to be smiling.

Terrible thoughts crowded in on him and he couldn't keep them out. He'd left Malik behind. He'd abandoned his friend because he was scared. He was a coward. There was no other word for it. He was a stinking, useless coward. He slapped his hand against his forehead.

Coward.

He sniffed and brushed a tear from his damp cheek. He was in the grip of a dark shadow; it seemed to wrap around him like a physical thing. A black cloud of misery and despair. This was a new feeling for him. He'd always been a cheerful boy, untroubled by anything. His life had run very smoothly. He'd passed every exam, won every cricket match, got texts from every pretty girl, sailed along without a care, not really thinking about anyone other than himself. He'd been happy because there had been nothing to make him unhappy. There had been no upsets.

He had no way of dealing with being unhappy. He felt helpless and broken. With Jack and Malik gone he didn't even have anyone to talk to, to share his problems with.

He slumped down in the seat, staring ahead as the wipers went left-right-left-right across the rain-flecked windscreen, clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak … gradually removing all traces of blood.

Clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak …

The coach trundled on, back the way they'd just come. Past the common. Past Tesco. Past the dentist and the empty silent houses, the doctor's surgery, the Hop Sack, the little row of shops.

Clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak …

There was the school now, and a knot of teachers wandering in the road. Ed barely noticed as the coach ploughed through them, knocking them aside.

Clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak …

'Where are we going?' he said, surprised by the low droning sound of his voice. He had only meant to think the question, not ask it out loud.

'London,' said the driver. 'The big smoke.'

Ed gave a short, bitter laugh. So much for his dreams of the country life. The sunny commune packed with wenches, milking cows, fattening pigs, collecting eggs, making babies, building a bright new future with Malik and his other friends. All gone now. All gone.

Clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak …

They drove along the high street. The driver had to slow down to manoeuvre the coach through a jumble of cars that had been left in the middle of the road. Once they were through the obstacle they sped up again and were soon passing the railway station and leaving town on the long straight road that led to the M25. There were buildings nearly all the way along here. The little villages that had once been distinct and separate had joined together into one continuous ugly strip of housing, garages, shops and offices.

Clomp-squeak-clomp-squeak …

There were people up ahead. Walking down the road. Grey shapes in the rain. More crazies probably. Ed gripped the armrests of his seat, ready for the jolt as they were knocked aside.

As the coach drew nearer, the walkers must have heard it. They turned round, their faces white streaks.

'Wait!' Ed shouted, leaning forward, craning to get a better look.

'What's the matter?' the driver barked. 'Sit down.'

'Stop the coach. You have to stop. It's Jack!'

17

‘What’s going on?’

The boys came warily up the steps. They looked wet and confused, but unharmed. Archie Bishop and Matt came first, with their younger followers. Then finally Jack. He looked at Ed, frowning.

‘What is this?’

‘We were attacked.’ Ed said it with a hint of shame in his voice, as if it had been his fault.

‘Attacked? Who by?’

‘Older kids. Teenagers, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. There were too many of them for us. The coach came …’

Now Jack looked properly at the driver for the first time, then back to Ed.

‘Who is he?’ he said with a hint of accusation.

‘My name’s Greg,’ said the driver. ‘Greg Thorne. And if you want to come to London get off them steps and go sit down.’

Jack still looked at Ed. ‘He’s an adult.’

‘Oi!’ Greg shouted. ‘You can talk to my face, sunshine, or you can get off my bus.’

‘I don’t mean to be rude,’ said Jack.

‘Then don’t be,’ Greg snapped. ‘I’ve saved your mates’ sorry arses here. I think a thank-you would be in order, don’t you?’

‘It’s just …’ Jack looked uncomfortable, hovering halfway up the steps. ‘Everything that’s happened … You must admit it’s hard for us to trust anyone older than we are.’

‘The door’s still open,’ said Greg, nodding towards the outside world, where the rain was falling more heavily now. ‘You want to take your chances out there, that’s fine by me. But make up your mind –

you're letting all the heat out.'

Jack came up one step and looked along the coach. Matt and his gang had already made their way to where the survivors from the chapel group were sitting, urgently catching up with what had happened.

'Do I look like I'm diseased?' Greg said, jutting out his jaw in a challenge. 'Do I *act* like I'm diseased? Can any of those dozy sods out there drive one of these things? They can't even speak no more, let alone master a three-point turn. So I'm your best hope, pal. Your *only* bleeding hope. An adult with a clean bill of health and a bloody big bus.'

Jack came up the last couple of steps.

'Thanks, Mr Thorne,' he said stiffly.

'Don't bother with the Mr Thorne crap. You can just call me Greg – everyone else does.'

'OK.'

Jack sat down next to Ed.

'Did you see anyone else?' Ed asked. 'Did you have any trouble?'

'No. The only trouble was being stuck with Matt and Archie and having to listen to their bollocks. So what happened to you then?'

Jack said it as if Ed had had some minor upset. How could he have known what it had really been like? For him the last half-hour had been nothing more than a boring walk through the rain.

'Did anyone get hurt?'

Ed stared out of the window, unable to catch Jack's eye. 'Yes,' he said quietly.

'Badly?'

Ed couldn't hold it in any longer. All the bottled-up fear and frustration and rage came pouring out.

'Look around you, Jack, look who's here,' he shouted. 'Can't you see?'

'You lost people?'

Ed nodded.

'How many?'

'I don't know, I haven't checked. I can't face it, Jack.'

'How many?' Jack jumped up and started to make his way down the length of the coach.

Ed followed him. 'What difference does it make?'

'Who's missing?'

'They're not *missing*, Jack, they're dead.' Ed grabbed Jack's shoulder and pulled him back. 'There was nothing we could do, OK? If Greg hadn't come along, we'd *all* be dead.'

'So it was all down to Greg?' said Jack.

'Yes.'

‘Not *you*? You didn’t do anything?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You didn’t whack any of them?’

Jack stared at Ed. Ed tried to say something but it just came out as mumbled nonsense.

‘I’ve seen you, Ed, in a fight,’ said Jack. ‘Or rather should I say I’ve *not* seen you in a fight.’

‘Please, Jack.’

‘You can’t hit them, can you? You won’t get your hands dirty. You’re bloody useless.’

Before Ed could protest Jack had turned away and was walking on down the aisle.

Ed felt like crying, but knew he had to hold it together. The thing was, Jack was right: he still couldn’t bring himself to hit any of them. He’d hoped Jack hadn’t noticed. But Jack didn’t miss a thing.

‘Malik?’ Jack called out. ‘I don’t see Malik?’

Ed caught up with him.

‘No,’ he said, the word catching in his throat. ‘He didn’t make it. This is all that’s left of us.’

‘Jesus.’

Jack was trying to take it in. Who else was dead? He spotted Bam. At least Bam was all right. He was sitting with Piers who had blood seeping from a head wound. Bam was trying to bandage him with a piece of ripped shirt.

‘Where’s Johnno and the others?’ Jack asked him.

Bam just shook his head.

‘All three of them?’ Jack couldn’t believe it.

‘Yes.’

‘But they were hard guys. They were good fighters.’

‘You weren’t there, Jack,’ said Bam, staring Jack down. ‘You don’t know what it was like. They ambushed us. There was nothing we could do. It was a bloody massacre. You had no right to talk to Ed like that. Ed looked after the little kids, and the girl. I saw him. He got us all on the bus. So you apologize to him. Right now.’

Jack dropped his head, put a hand out and squeezed Ed’s arm.

‘I’m sorry, mate,’ he said quietly. ‘I shouldn’t have said that. I was out of order. It’s just … It’s not real. It’s totally freaked me out. I said goodbye to you all less than an hour ago. Who’s left?’

He carried on checking the seats. Ed walked behind him.

Justin the nerd was sitting by himself, his head in his hands. Both his friends were missing. Jack couldn’t see *any* of the Field House boys.

‘They can’t all be dead.’

‘They are.’

Matt was sitting with the remaining four boys from the church group who hadn’t set off with him to London.

‘You should have come with me,’ he said as Ed went past. ‘The Lamb would have protected you.’

‘Shut up, Matt!’ Ed yelled at him. ‘Your poxy made-up religion wouldn’t have made any difference.’

‘But it did make a difference, didn’t it?’ said Matt with a smug smile. ‘We weren’t touched.’

‘That was just luck.’

‘Was it?’

‘Leave it, Ed.’ Jack kept walking. ‘There’s no point in arguing with him. I’ve tried it.’

Frédérique was all right, as were Kwanele and Chris Marker, who as usual had his head buried in a book, oblivious to the world. Arthur and Wiki were sitting together. They looked very pale and shocked, but at least they were unhurt.

Further back were a little boy and a girl with long curly black hair, who Jack didn’t recognize. Greg must have picked them up earlier. They looked at Jack and Ed as if they were intruders, strangers who had got into their safe place, but then the girl smiled at them. A big open friendly smile showing tiny white teeth.

‘Hello,’ she said, ‘my name’s Zohra. I’m nine. This is my brother, Froggie. He’s seven. I’m looking after him until Mum gets back. We’re going to London. Everything’s going to be all right there, Greg said so.’

Froggie smiled too now. The smile was so hopeful and trusting it broke Jack’s heart. He was aptly named. He had big, slightly bulging eyes and a wide mouth. Jack wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that he had webbed feet.

‘Yeah,’ he said kindly. ‘Everything’s going to be all right.’

‘I’ve never been to London,’ said Froggie. ‘I want to go on the London Eye.’

Jack was about to say something to try to reassure the little boy when he was stopped by a shout from the back of the bus that hit him like a slap.

‘Hey. You. Ketchup face! What’s your name?’

18

There were three girls half hidden behind a wall of cardboard boxes, as far back as they could get on the bus. There were loads more boxes stacked up around them and crates of bottled water wrapped in plastic film.

Jack walked towards them. ‘Are you talking to me?’ he asked as he got nearer.

‘Don’t see no one else with crap all over their face.’

The girl sniggered and a hot flush of anger passed through Jack, as if his blood had suddenly turned to acid. He glared at the girls. At first it was as if the three of them were one single creature, the way a gang of girls can be, stronger than their individual parts. They looked to be about his age, dressed in clothes that must once have been fashionable, but were now dirty and tattered. They were a riot of bright colours, big hair, too much make-up, broken accessories and ripped tights, like a new girl band with an extreme image.

Apocalypse Divas …

There was an overpowering smell of cheap perfume coming off them. Presumably they’d drowned themselves in the stuff to hide the fact that none of them had had a shower in ages.

Jack was suddenly aware of his own body odour in the cramped confines of the bus, made worse by the damp fumes rising from his soggy clothes.

It was the pretty blonde one in the aisle seat chewing gum who’d shouted at him. She looked at him defiantly. Daring him to say something.

Jack just stood there, too angry to speak.

‘You been in a fight then?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, I’ve been in lots,’ Jack snapped. ‘But that’s got nothing to do with this.’ He put a hand to his birthmark.

The girl carried on staring at him. Like a fussy shopper wondering whether to buy something.

‘So, what is that all over your face, then?’

‘It’s a birthmark.’

‘A birthmark? You mean you was born like that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No.’

‘Why don’t you do something about it then? You know, get it removed? Like a tattoo? Can’t you get it removed?’

Jack shrugged. His anger was fading away. At least this girl was direct and honest. Most people when they first met him were embarrassed and pretended not to notice anything different about him, and then they’d secretly stare at him when they thought he wasn’t looking.

‘So, what’s your name, then?’ she asked, her jaw working away at the gum.

‘Jack.’

‘*Jack*,’ she repeated, trying it out. ‘Are you lot all, like, from the same school, or something?’

‘Yes. Rowhurst.’

‘Never heard of it. Must be posh. You look posh. Some of you is wearing suits. Only posh kids wear suits. Are you rich?’

Jack shrugged again.

The blonde girl nodded to Ed, who was hanging back behind Jack. ‘Who’s your friend?’

‘I’m Ed.’

‘*I’m Ed,*’ she mimicked him. ‘You’re even posher than he is. I bet you’re a millionaire.’

‘Money doesn’t really exist any more, does it?’

‘Yeah, but *were* you a millionaire?’

Ed laughed. ‘No.’

‘Was it horrible back there?’ asked the girl nearest the window, whose black hair and dark skin were almost the opposite of her blonde friend. ‘We couldn’t look.’

‘It was pretty bad,’ said Ed. ‘We lost a lot of mates.’

‘I’m sorry.’ The girl offered him a sad smile.

‘My name’s Aleisha, by the way,’ she added, then nodded to her blonde friend. ‘She’s Brooke. She’s got a well big mouth on her, but she’s a’right.’

‘I ain’t a’right,’ said Brooke. ‘I’m a right bitch, but I’m pretty so I can get away with it. Unlike Aleisha who’s an ugly little midget and

has to be nice to everyone.'

'Ha, ha,' said Aleisha. 'Everyone knows I'm prettier than you.'

'On what planet? My *butt* is prettier than you, Mrs Shrek.'

The three girls laughed.

Jack felt self-conscious, awkward. He'd always been slightly nervous around girls, not helped by his birthmark. Ed was different. Ed was easy and relaxed with everyone. Didn't matter who. Already he was settling down comfortably on the edge of a seat, leaning forward, smiling at the girl's jokes. Jack stood there in the aisle feeling like an idiot, shuffling from one foot to the other. He wanted to go, but thought it might look like he was running away from them.

Ed wasn't hanging back.

'What are you called?' he asked, eyeballing the third girl.

'That's Courtney,' said Aleisha.

'We're like a set,' said Courtney, who was larger than her friends, not exactly fat, but not thin either. Her hair was scraped back and she had a nasty bruise under one eye that she'd tried to hide with make-up.

'Brooke's like white bread,' Courtney went on. 'Aleisha's black, I'm half and half.'

'You're a sort of yellow,' said Aleisha.

'I ain't yellow,' said Courtney indignantly. 'Do I look yellow to you?'

'Yeah, an' I'm not black neither,' said Aleisha. 'Black is like *black*, like black ink. My skin ain't black. It's brown. I'm African-Caribbean. Not like you, I don't know *what* you are.'

'Who are you kidding, sister?' said Courtney. 'You're black as they come.'

'So how did you end up on the bus, then?' Ed interrupted before they got into another argument. 'Were you all friends before?'

'This is our bus!' said Brooke.

'Your bus?'

'Our bus!' said Courtney and Aleisha together.

'We was on a school journey, near Bilbao, in Spain.'

'Spain's a dump,' said Courtney. 'Don't go there.'

'We was there when people started getting, like, sick,' said Aleisha. 'It was really scary, like a disaster movie or something. At first it looked like we was gonna be stuck there, but in the end our teachers said we had to try and get home. We drove all the way across Spain and France to get to the ferry, and all the time it was getting worser and worser. We heard it on the radio. Our mobiles wasn't working, so we couldn't speak to none of our families nor no one.'

'By the time we got to the ferry the port was closed,' said Courtney. 'The French ferry people was on, like, strike. They said they

didn't want to spread the disease.'

'We was in this, like, grotty hotel for ages in Calais,' said Aleisha. 'With no food.'

'Calais is a *dump*,' said Courtney. 'I am not *ever* going back to Calais, man.'

Brooke took up the story. 'Some of the kids went off with a teacher to, like, try and get back on their own,' she said. 'But in the end the British government arranged for this, like, special ferry to bring everyone back who was stuck there. We was the last ferry out of France.'

'It was horrible,' said Aleisha. 'People was going mad trying to get on, but because we was, like, children, they let us go, yeah?'

'Back in England it was worse, though,' said Brooke. 'The roads was all jammed, people getting sick and going nuts all over the place. We couldn't believe it. Half our teachers was losing it big time. We had to get off the motorway in the end. Our driver was getting sick. We went to a place called Ashford.'

'Ashford's a dump,' said Courtney.

'Some more kids split when we got there,' said Aleisha. 'But we didn't know what to do. It was all happening so fast. That's what was really freaking us out. It was like the end of the world or something. Nothing was working and there was people everywhere, just sort of wandering about, and more and more of them was getting sick. It was horrible. Some of the kids got in a fight with some grown-ups. Then one of the teachers tried driving the bus. Took us to the, like, what do you call it, the countryside.'

'The countryside's a dump,' said Courtney.

'That was the last teacher,' said Aleisha. 'Mr Betts. He was a'right. Looked after us, but then even he's got sick.'

'We was stuck on the bus in the middle of the countryside,' said Courtney. 'With all these grown-ups around.'

'It was like a what-d'you-ma-call-it, a siege or something,' said Aleisha. 'They was all, like, trying to get on the bus. Luckily Greg come along and sorted them out, but us three's the only ones who made it out of, like, a hundred.'

'There was never a hundred of us,' said Brooke.

'Well, there was a lot.'

'Greg's rescued us last night,' said Courtney. 'We been a'right since then. It ain't so bad on here. We got food and water and a toilet. But it's bare slow, because most of the roads is blocked. Is a nightmare. We got to keep going round other ways, stopping and starting, avoiding people, going back the way we come. I dunno how long it'd normally take, but Greg's already been driving for, like, hours.'

'I reckon we'll be a'right now,' said Aleisha. 'There's more of us.

Greg keeps picking people up. It's better with more people. And you boys look tough enough.'

'You can stay,' said Courtney with a snigger.

'So long as you do what we tell you,' said Brooke. 'Our bus, our rules.'

'Where's Greg taking you all, though?' said Jack.

'He's gonna get us to London so's we can go home,' said Courtney.

'Where was your school? Where are you all from?'

'Willesden.'

'Where's Willesden?' Ed asked.

'You ain't never heard of Willesden?' Aleisha sounded amazed.

'Nope.'

'It's in north-west London.'

'It's a dump,' said Courtney.

'I thought you might say that,' said Ed.

For a while there was silence as the five of them thought over all that had happened recently. Finally Aleisha spoke.

'So we've all lost people,' she said with a sad smile.

'Yeah.'

'But we gonna be a'right. Here come the girls!'

Brooke, Courtney and Aleisha laughed and bumped fists.

Ed felt weird. It was as if they were discussing losing a dog or a football match, not friends. It had been a terrifying few minutes of bloody carnage back at The Fez, and it sounded like the girls had been through hell themselves, but now here they were in this little bubble looking inwards, trying to laugh it all off.

He'd noticed it before, the way people tried to pretend that things weren't as bad as they were. It was a way of keeping the horror away, he supposed. When it came down to it, they were none of them any better, any cleverer, any more sorted than poor little Froggie with his dream of going on the London Eye.

He was starting to feel a bit numb, pushing the memories to the side where he couldn't feel them any more. You couldn't go on being sad and scared all the time, could you, or you'd go mad.

Talking to these mouthy girls was helping take his mind off things. It was helping take him to a normal place. Boys and girls. Flirting. Text messaging. My mate fancies you …

They all knew it was a game.

Let's all pretend we're just a bunch of ordinary girls and boys meeting on a bus. There's nothing outside the bus. There's only the bus.

'You're quite buff, you know,' said Brooke, giving Ed the eye. 'Your mate'd be all right if he didn't have that thing on his face. If I go

with a boy, he has to be, like, *perfect*.'

Now it was Jack's turn to laugh. 'Ed's nowhere near perfect.'

'He's better than you, darling.'

'Well, maybe I don't want to be your boyfriend.'

'That's good because you're not going to be,' said Brooke. 'You can have Courtney. She'll take anyone, because she's fat. Although she's quickly becoming skinny now. Any more of this starvation diet she can become a supermodel!'

'You're so full of it, Brooke,' said Courtney.

'Not as full of it as you. You look like you've eaten like a *mattress*, or something.'

The coach swerved and Jack had to steady himself against a seat back.

'Sit down!' Greg barked from the front. 'There's trouble up ahead!'

Ed swore. The bubble was burst.

19

Jack hurried to the front of the coach and leant on the back of Greg's seat.

'Didn't you hear me?' said Greg. 'Sit down. This could get bumpy.'

'I wanted to see what's going on.'

'I can cope all right by myself, thank you very much.'

'Yeah, and so can I,' said Jack. 'I've got this far without you, and I've done that by not trusting anyone. Looking after number one.'

'Yeah? Well, I'm number one now, pal,' said Greg. 'And don't you forget it. Now d'you want to sit down or do you want me to knock you down?'

'I'm sitting.' Jack collapsed into a seat and did up the belt, leaning forward to try to see what was happening ahead.

There were a lorry and several cars in the middle of the road about four hundred metres away. One of the cars appeared to be on fire. Nasty-looking black smoke billowed and boiled across the road. In among the smoke Jack could just make out some kind of fight taking place. It was hard to tell from this distance who was involved, whether it was kids or grown-ups or, most likely, both.

Greg swore. 'We'll have to find another way round.' He stamped on the brake and the coach snorted and shuddered to a halt.

'There might be kids up there,' said Jack.

'Don't make no difference,' said Greg, checking the rear-view mirrors. 'It's too risky. We don't have any idea what's going on, or how dangerous it might be. Could be a full-scale war for all we know. We can't risk the coach getting damaged. At the moment it's all that's keeping us safe. It's a fortress on wheels and I aim to keep it that way. You want to go and see if there's any kids need rescuing, Batman, you

can get out and walk.'

The coach was too long to turn round here. Greg put it into reverse and started to laboriously manoeuvre it backwards along the road. The warning system was giving out an insistent, irritating beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep.

Jack stayed silent, staring ahead. After a while he saw figures emerging from the smoke, limping, lurching, stumbling, swaying from side to side, but moving fast.

'You need to go quicker,' he said.

'Oh, listen to Jeremy Clarkson,' said Greg.

'They look sick, but they can run …'

'Shut it,' Greg snapped. 'I'm trying to concentrate here. I'm not a professional bleeding coach driver, am I? These things are a bugger to keep in a straight line.'

The running figures were getting nearer and nearer.

They were close enough now for Jack to see that they were definitely diseased. They were a mess, their skin blistered, their clothes hanging off them, smoke-blackened and blood-spattered.

Greg managed to reverse past a turning before the first of the attackers reached them. A lanky young man of about twenty. He hurled himself at the windscreen and tried to get a grip. He tore off one of the wipers and Greg cursed. Then the rest of them arrived, some scrabbling at the door, others jumping up and banging their fists on the windscreen. A shrill high-pitched scream came from somewhere towards the back of the bus. Jack watched helplessly as the other wiper was ripped off.

'Right,' said Greg, wrenching the gear lever into first. 'You asked for it.'

He floored the accelerator and the coach juddered forward, quickly picking up speed and shaking off the first wave of attackers, who slithered out of the way and ran alongside, spitting with fury. Two stragglers were batted to the ground as the coach smashed into them and Greg spun the wheel, veering off on to the side-road.

'It's been like this all the way,' he said. 'Every time I pick a route I have to change it. And now we've lost them wipers we're gonna be screwed if it rains much worse than this.'

Ed came up to join Jack.

'Everything all right?'

'Can't you lot stay sat down?' Greg shouted.

'Is the road blocked?'

'We'll find another way.'

'Looks like we can make a left about a mile ahead,' said the boy who was sitting in the seat behind Greg. He was studying a road map, squinting through his wire-framed spectacles.

‘Thanks, son,’ said Greg, and he turned to grin at Jack and Ed. ‘That’s what I need, practical help. Not you bunch of toffs flapping about.’

‘Tell us what you need us to do and we’ll do it,’ said Ed.

‘I need you to sit down and shut up.’ Greg glanced back over his shoulder at his son. ‘We’re coping just fine, ain’t we, Liam?’

‘Yeah,’ said Liam quietly. He was a miniature of Greg in every way except that where his dad was loud and aggressive he looked slightly shy, almost embarrassed by him.

‘Good lad,’ said Greg. ‘He don’t say much, but he’s a bright one. Ain’t you, Liam? All his teachers say so.’

‘Nice to meet you, Liam,’ said Ed. ‘I’m Ed and this is Jack.’

Liam looked down at the floor and mumbled something.

‘We could have done with you earlier,’ said Ed kindly. ‘We needed a map reader and you look like a pretty good navigator.’

‘And he didn’t learn none of that at school, neither,’ said Greg. ‘Everything he knows *I’ve* learned him.’

‘Where were you all going when we picked you up?’ Liam asked softly.

‘We were trying to get to the countryside,’ said Ed. ‘Thought it might be easier there.’

‘You’re joking, aren’t you?’ scoffed Greg. ‘Where d’you think we just come from? You don’t want to go to the countryside, pal, not unless you want to end up as dinner for some bunch of spotty Herberts.’

‘Can’t be any worse than the towns,’ said Ed.

‘You think? Everyone’s had the same idea as you – get away as far as possible from other people, get out of town, go back to nature, live off the land. They’ve watched too many Bear Grylls programmes on the telly. And what happens? They’ve all wound up in the great outdoors with everyone else. Don’t know what they thought they was gonna do when they got there. The roads are absolutely chocka with abandoned cars – that’s why we’ve taken so long to get back up this way. City types. Useless. Didn’t know one end of a cow from the other, most of them. Soon started fighting over what there was left, which wasn’t much, I can tell you. It’s all right one bloke and his dog living off the land – not millions of blokes, and their wives and girlfriends, and boyfriends and kids and bleeding hamsters. Millions of them there was. That’s why the towns are empty. You know what you would have found if you’d made it to the countryside proper?’

‘What?’ Jack asked.

‘Fields and fields and fields piled high with dead bodies. Stinking, rotten, flyblown corpses. That’s what you’d have found. Death and disease like you can’t imagine. It’s bloody chaos. I don’t have the

words to describe it. Maybe if I'd been to a fancy school like you I would, I could quote some poetry or some Shakespeare maybe. To be or not to be. I'm not a poet. I'm a butcher.'

'A butcher?' Ed didn't know why, but he found this quite funny.

'Yeah.' Greg nodded towards a black case in the luggage rack above the first row of seats. 'You don't believe me you can check out me knives. Never go anywhere without them.'

'I believe you,' said Jack.

'Yeah, good, well, so I might not know much about words, but I do know about livestock. About animals. Dead animals, I'll give you that, but animals all the same. Meat. That's what I understand. Meat. You know what it says on my shop sign, my motto, like? MEAT IS LIFE. I run an organic butcher's in Islington. You probably heard of it – Greg's Organic Gaff. Well, your mum and dad might of. I been on the telly a few times. *The One Show* and that. My sausages have won more awards than you can count. Butcher of the Year two years running, I was. So don't tell me I don't know about meat. And to know about meat you got to know about animals. I got me suppliers, you see, organic farmers and that, and I have to visit them regular. See where the meat's coming from. Well, when this all kicked off, I was down there, on one of the farms near Maidstone, with Liam. He likes to visit the farms, don't you, son?'

Liam nodded.

'Good farm. Good meat. One of me top boys he was, the gaffer, Big Paul McLaren. He said we could stay with him till things blew over. Reckoned we'd be better off there on the farm with him and his lads. Well, things never did blow over, did they? We've fortified the place. Wasn't hard. Big Paul had guns and everything for shooting vermin. Came in well handy for shooting trespassers. Had like a smokery in a barn. We've smoked enough meat to get by on, and we've held out for a while, but it soon got silly. In the end Big Paul and all his family start getting sick, don't they? Wasn't nice. Had to shoot *them* and all. All except his youngest boy, *Little* Paul. Then the animals started to get sick. I'm a butcher not a vet, and without Big Paul we didn't know what to do. Couldn't risk eating them no more. I'll tell you it was nuts. Too many crazies turning up. Dead bodies rotting everywhere. We realized we had to get out of there. Thought we might as well try and get home, the boy and me.'

'What happened to Little Paul?' Jack asked.

'Never made it,' said Greg simply, and didn't explain any further.

'We found the coach after two days,' said Liam.

'Only just in time,' said Greg. 'I drive me butcher's van all over, more of a truck than a van, really, so I know a bit about these things. I'm like Noah's ark on here, aren't I? Be perfect if it weren't for them

three harpies at the back – Girls Aloud.'

'What are you going to do when you get to London?' Ed asked, hoping Greg might have a plan.

'Dunno, but there must be food all over,' Greg replied. 'Lying around in shops and warehouses and people's kitchen cupboards. Everyone got into hoarding in a big way when it all started going tits-up, and then they've all died before they could eat much of it. There's got to be more nosh stockpiled in London than in the countryside, I reckon. But the real reason we want to get back is … You tell 'em, Liam.'

'We want to get back to see the Arsenal.'

Ed laughed. 'I don't think they're still playing.'

'He knows that, smart arse,' said Greg. 'He means the stadium. The Emirates, as was. That's like a church for me and Liam, a cathedral of dreams. We've spent our best days there, ain't we, son? We just want to get back home where we can see it.'

Greg twisted round in his seat to study Jack and Ed.

'You probably think that's stupid, don't you?'

'No,' said Jack. 'Seems as good a reason as any to go to London.'

'Yeah, well, I ain't stupid, pal.'

'Didn't say you were.'

'You gotta have something to believe in,' Greg went on. 'Keeps you going. Stops you from chewing on your own dark thoughts.'

'Can I ask you something?' Jack asked.

'Fire away.'

'You won't get angry?'

'Can't guarantee it. It depends if it's a stupid question.'

'Why haven't you got sick like everyone else?'

'Don't know, don't care.'

'But it's important,' said Jack. 'We thought everyone older was –'

'Listen,' said Greg, interrupting Jack. 'You must have seen it yourselves. Some of them, didn't make no difference what age, what sex, what race, just so long as they was over fourteen, they've pretty much got ill straight away and within a few hours they've dropped down dead. Others took longer to die, a few days. Others didn't die at all. They're still wandering around out there dribbling and squeezing their spots. The disease takes everyone different. Me, I must have a special gene or some antibodies or whatever that's protecting me. Yeah? Or maybe I'm just stronger. I can fight it off. I mean, let's face it, nobody knows why you lot, you kids, ain't got sick. Look at you, all bright eyes and rosy cheeks. It's not bloody fair. Kids these days, spoilt, want everything on a plate. Well, now you got it, you've got the world to yourselves. How d'you like it, eh? Your dreams came true; you got your three wishes. No more pesky adults to mess up your

spoilt little lives. Except for them out there. The nutters. The walking bags of pus. What was it the Scared Kid called them? The mothers and fathers. Ha ha! Welcome to paradise. Have a nice stay. Turn out the lights before you leave. Now, I'm starving. I can't keep this up on an empty stomach. I gotta eat something.'

He slammed on the brakes and reared up at Jack and Ed, a leery smile exposing two rows of neat little teeth.

'How's about I start with you two, eh?' he snarled, then burst out laughing as Jack and Ed shrank away from him.

'Your faces!' he said. 'What a picture.' He chuckled and looked to Liam, who was smiling sheepishly. 'Did you see them soft sods, Liam? What a picture. What a bloody picture.'

He applied the handbrake and switched off the engine.

'Don't worry, lads,' he said, standing up and stretching. 'I never eat boys for lunch … I prefer a nice salad.'

20

They'd stopped on a long straight stretch of open road with good views in all directions. If anyone approached them, they would be clearly visible.

Greg rationed out food from the cardboard boxes stacked at the back of the bus, moaning all the while that with all the newcomers there was less to go round. Jack wondered why he'd picked them up in the first place if he didn't want them on board, but he reckoned Greg just wanted to make sure everyone knew who was in charge.

It wasn't as if their lunch was exactly five stars, either. It was bags of crisps and Cheestrings mostly, with some stale Nutri-Grain, although Jack noticed that Greg had his own separate food supply that he kept in a cool box stashed behind his seat. He and Liam sat up front eating alone.

Jack was sitting halfway back with Chris Marker, who was eating a bag of crisps while reading his book. Jack was happy with the arrangement. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to think either, so he was reading the information on the back of his own crisp packet. He was surprised by how much there was to read.

He was just working out the energy values when he became aware of someone standing next to him.

He heard a meow and looked up. Frédérique was holding her cat-carrying box at Jack's eye level and he could see the tabby cowering suspiciously at the far end, its eyes wide and staring.

'You all right?'

Frédérique nodded, the curtain of hair round her face opening for a moment. Jack got a glimpse of eyes as wide and frightened as the cat's.

‘Have you got some food for her?’ he asked. ‘Him? Is it a male or a female?’

A voice came from behind the hair, so quietly that for a second or two Jack thought he’d imagined it.

‘Female.’

‘Have you got some food for her?’

Frédérique nodded again.

‘What’s her name?’

‘Dior.’ A whisper.

‘Like the perfume?’

Frédérique shrugged.

Jack knew she wanted something, but couldn’t work out what. At least she was speaking, though, coming out of her shell a little. It was a start. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. She’d tell him in her own time what it was she wanted.

At last she spoke again.

‘Dior must come out of her cage for a minute.’

‘Really?’

‘She needs to go to the bathroom.’

Jack’s smile grew wider before he could stop himself.

‘She needs a crap?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well. OK. Let’s go outside. But won’t she run off?’

‘I don’t think so. She is scared, though.’

Jack got up. We’re all scared, he thought, but said nothing. He led Frédérique up the aisle towards the front.

As he got nearer to Greg he saw that he and Liam had better food than the others. Proper cheese, crackers, a tin of cold beans, even some apples and slices of smoked meat. He watched as Greg offered some meat to Liam. Liam shook his head, concentrating on the handful of crackers he was munching his way through.

Jack paused and put a hand on Frédérique’s arm. He didn’t want to interrupt and wind Greg up any more. He waited for his moment, listening to their conversation.

‘You gotta get some protein inside you,’ Greg was complaining to Liam.

‘Cheese is protein.’

‘Meat is better.’

‘I’m all right. I don’t want it. I don’t like it.’

‘Go on – it’s good for you. Look at me. I eat well and I’m healthy. You want to be like me, don’tcha?’

‘I *am* healthy, Dad.’

‘You won’t stay healthy if you don’t eat proper balanced food.’

Greg noticed Jack and stopped talking. Jack stepped forward.

‘We want to get off the bus.’

Greg went back to his food.

‘You’re walking from here?’ he asked.

‘No. We just need to go outside for a minute.’

‘Way too risky, pal. Don’t even think about it.’

‘Oh, come on – we can see fine from here. If anyone comes, we’ll get straight back on.’

‘What d’you want to get off for anyway? Fresh air?’

‘The cat needs a dump.’

Greg laughed, like it was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

‘I’ll tell you what we can do with that cat,’ he said when he’d calmed down and taken control of himself. ‘We’ll skin him, gut him, butcher him and make him into some nice kebabs.’ He finally turned back round to look at the two of them. ‘How does that sound?’

Frédérique gasped and held the box more tightly to her chest. This made Greg laugh even harder.

‘Only joking, love. Did you see her face, Liam? What a picture. But, seriously, that moggy’s gonna be more trouble than it’s worth. You can’t get sentimental over pets, love, not since what’s happened.’

‘The cat’s all she’s got,’ said Jack. ‘Bit like you and Arsenal.’

Greg peered at Jack, trying to work out if he was making fun of him. In the end he gave him the benefit of the doubt.

‘Point taken,’ he said, and opened the door.

‘You want to go out there in the rain, that’s fine with me. But the first sign of any trouble I’m pulling up the drawbridge. The door closes and stays closed. Savvy?’

21

Jack and Frédérique stood by the coach in the drizzle. The rain had died down a little. There was just a general dampness in the air rather than actual drops falling. It had got colder and Jack shivered. He watched as Frédérique squatted down and put her cat box on the ground. She carefully opened the front then reached in to take hold of the cat. She eased her out and held her under her chin, stroking her and whispering soothing words into her twitching ear. Then she sneezed. Just her luck if she was allergic to cats.

Jack looked along the stretch of empty road ahead. They'd gone on a very roundabout route since leaving Rowhurst and he wasn't sure whether they were any nearer to London than when they'd started.

Ed came down off the bus, zipping up his jacket.

'What are you doing?'

Jack nodded towards Frédérique. 'Cat needs a crap.'

Ed smiled. 'Feels good to be out of there,' he said, and glanced back to make sure Greg couldn't hear them.

'It's a bit claustrophobic, if you know what I mean. Greg's kind of … Well, he fills the space.'

'I hate guys like that,' said Jack. 'Always trying to throw their weight around. He's a bully.'

'Yeah, but remember we'd all be dead without him. Those teenagers were –'

Jack shot Ed a look and nodded towards Frédérique, who was gently putting the cat down into the long grass by the side of the road. The girl was terrified; there was no point in making it worse by reminding her of how close she'd come to being killed.

Ed mouthed 'sorry' and Jack went over to Frédérique. The cat was

looking around nervously, then she stretched her back and darted quickly under a bush where she sat looking back at Frédérique.

'You're sure she won't run off?'

'I have food. She will come back for food.' Frédérique fished a small can of cat food out of her coat pocket and popped the lid.

'I did not want to open it on the bus. I was worried that if anyone sees it they will take it. It is food, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'I'll make sure they leave you alone,' said Jack. 'That's your food – you can do what you like with it.'

'Thank you. I will put it in her cage when she is finished.' She said something to the cat in French. The cat checked out her surroundings once more then walked daintily on stiff legs out from under the bush, tiptoeing a little deeper into the sodden greenery of the verge.

Greg was watching the three of them through the window.

'Look at those idiots,' he said to Liam and chuckled. 'They ain't even got the sense to be scared.'

'Is it all right to be scared, Dad?' Liam asked quietly.

'A little, son, just a little. Keeps you on your toes.'

'D'you get scared?'

'Course I do. Wouldn't be human otherwise, would I? But you don't have to be scared, Liam, 'cause I'm always gonna be here to look after you.'

'I try, Dad. I try not to be. But I ain't like you, really. You're a man.'

Greg put an arm round Liam and gave him a bear hug.

'Listen, Liam, everything I'm doing, I'm doing for you. I sound like that soppy song, don't I? But it's true. I don't really care about me, whether I live or die, quite frankly, and before you go getting all down in the mouth I don't aim to be kicking the bucket any time in the near future, OK? Not while I've got you to look out for. My job now is the same as it's always been, since the day you was born. To protect you. To stop you from being scared. To put my arms round you. It's a bad world out there, son, and without me you'd be dead in five minutes.'

'I know, Dad.'

'So you have to listen to me, do as I say. If anything was to happen to you, I'd go mad. Maybe that's what's keeping me healthy, eh? My love for you.'

'Could be, Dad.'

Greg rubbed the top of Liam's head with his fist.

'You're a good boy. I'm so proud of you, son. So proud. You're all I live for.'

Ed stood on the lowest step of the bus to get a better vantage point.

He was nervous being out here, but he'd wanted to keep close to Jack, even though it was obvious that Jack didn't really want him around. He was trying to talk to Frédérique and Ed felt like a spare part. Maybe if he kept watch he might appear to be useful.

Jack was watching the cat as she rooted around among the plants.

'Listen, Frédérique,' he said. 'I know you've been through some bad stuff, we all have. But … if you want to talk about any of it, you know, it might help.'

'I am scared,' she said bluntly.

'We're all scared,' said Jack.

'No. You do not understand. You cannot understand. I am so scared.'

'I do understand. Since your dad died …'

'Yes.' Frédérique gripped Jack's forearm. 'Yes. You are right. Since my father died I am scared.'

'But we're all together now, we're safe on the bus. I'll look after you. Greg will look after you. We'll all look after you. Look, even Ed's keeping an eye out for us.'

'Why is Greg not sick?'

'I honestly don't know.' Jack shook his head. 'He doesn't know either. Maybe the sickness doesn't affect everyone.'

Frédérique smiled for the first time, and it was as if the clouds had lifted and the sun was beaming bright and warm. Her whole face changed and Jack was with another person.

She looked very beautiful when she smiled.

'Yes,' she said, nodding her head. 'Maybe not everyone will get sick. Maybe everything will be all right.'

'You see,' said Jack. 'We don't need to give up hope.'

'Yes.' Frédérique was madly nodding, smiling and crying at the same time. Then there was a gust of cold wind and she stifled a small cough, anxious not to alarm the cat.

'So, how did you end up at Rowhurst?' Jack asked. 'I mean, I know your dad was there and everything, but …'

'My mother she still was living in France. In Paris. But my father is walk out on her. They argue all the time. I was at school in Paris but I miss my papa. My mother, she was one of the first to get sick. She send me to England to be with my papa. She thought I would be safer here. She thought maybe because England is an island it will be better. I came in the Eurostar. It was very difficult when I arrive. To get from London to Rowhurst take me a long time and when I arrive is very bad. Papa, he try to keep me safe, we hide in the flat, keep the curtains closed all day, but … then … Yesterday, he is go out and not come back. I know he is sick. I have seen the same *symptômes* …? How you say *symptôme*?'

‘Symptom,’ said Jack. ‘It’s the same word.’

‘Yes. The same. I see that Papa is sick like Mama. That I think is why he leave me. He did not want to hurt me. But I don’t see him again. Then you come. You save me, Jack.’

Jack could see that Frédérique was going to lose it again so he put his arms round her and held her. He felt pretty rotten that he’d been the one to kill her father, but he’d had to do it, and it wasn’t like the man had even really been human any more. He wondered if he would ever be able to tell her. Now was definitely not the time. Frédérique felt warm and damp, and very thin. She was trembling in the cold. He stroked her back, looking over her shoulder.

It was a little while before he realized the cat was nowhere to be seen.

‘Dior?’ he said, breaking away from Frédérique. ‘Where is she?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Frédérique. ‘She is there. But she needs to be private or she will not do what she needs to do.’

‘I know how she feels,’ said Jack with a lopsided grin.

His grin faded as Ed called out to them.

‘People!’

Way off down the road in the direction they had come Jack could see dark shapes moving.

‘Grown-ups?’ he asked.

‘Reckon so.’

‘Are they coming our way?’

‘Far as I can tell.’

Jack checked the road. He could just make out some distant figures. He turned back to Frédérique. ‘We need to go. Get the cat, can you?’

‘She is not finish. She will not come until she is finish.’

‘All right, we’ve got a few minutes, but if Greg sees those bloody zombies he might leave without us.’

‘We have time. They are far away.’

‘Far away but getting nearer,’ Ed said, shielding his eyes from the drizzling rain.

Frédérique bent down and put the opened tin of food in the carrying-box. Then she started making noises to entice Dior back towards it. Jack could still see no sign of the cat. His eyes flicked from the patch of vegetation to the road, from the road to the bushes, back and forth.

No sign of the cat in one direction – people growing steadily closer in the other.

‘Come on,’ Ed urged, nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot.

‘Stand in the way of the door,’ Jack said quietly. ‘So Greg can’t

close it.'

'OK.' Ed did as he was told.

'Come on, puss,' said Jack, joining Frédérique.

'*Non*.' Frédérique pushed him away. 'She will not come if you are there.'

'If she doesn't come soon, we'll have to leave her.'

'I won't leave her. She was Papa's cat. I gave her to him when she was a kitten. The last thing he said before he leave me is look after her, feed her, and now he is gone she is all that I have left of him.'

'Where is she, though? I can't see her.'

'She is there.'

'Where?' Jack wanted to say a lot of things. That Dior was just a cat. That their own lives were more important. That the cat would probably be better off trying to fend for itself in the wild …

But he didn't say any of them. He just stood there getting damp and scared.

'Are you sure she's there?' he asked, trying to hold it together.

The approaching people were close enough now that he could make out individuals. They were definitely not kids. Men and women, mothers and fathers, about twenty of them.

It was only a matter of time before Greg saw them.

'Frédérique, you'll have to leave her. I can't see any sign of her. She's probably run off.'

Frédérique made some more cooing noises. 'She is there, but she is nervous.'

'She's not the only one. Here, puss-puss-puss … if you can see her, can't you just go over and grab her?'

'No – if I try it and she is scared she might then run away.'

'Come on … We'll have to leave her.'

'Oi!' Greg shouted from the coach. 'All aboard, who's coming aboard. There's some movement down the way.'

'We're just coming,' said Jack. 'Hold on.'

'Get out of the doorway so I can close it.'

'No. It's all right.' Ed sounded rattled. 'I'm keeping watch. Those people are still a long way off.'

'You saw them already, didn't you? Why didn't you say nothing?'

'They're miles away.'

'Whatever – I ain't taking no risks. Now get out of my doorway so's I can close up.'

'Here, puss-puss-puss …'

'Move it!'

'They just need to get the cat,' said Ed.

Greg swore, calling the cat all manner of filthy names. Jack couldn't help but agree with him. He didn't want to get left behind for

the sake of a pet, but he'd promised Frédérique that he'd stay with her.

'Here, puss-puss …'

He looked down the road.

Oh, Jesus.

The grown-ups weren't moving very fast but they were tramping steadily towards the bus, breathing through their mouths, rotten flesh hanging off their faces. The mother who seemed to be leading them had bulging black-rimmed eyes like hard-boiled eggs. She was completely bald with a patch of bare skull on the top of her head surrounded by a ring of boils.

'Here, puss, come on, Dior, come on, cat …'

'I can see her.'

'Where?'

The cat's face emerged from the long grass and it sneaked towards Frédérique, sensing the tense atmosphere.

Frédérique was smiling at her and rubbing her fingertips together, making a dry rustling sound.

Thank God.

There was a hiss and a rumble as Greg fired up the coach and the cat darted back into the bushes.

'You arsehole!' Jack yelled.

Frédérique wailed. 'She is too scared.'

'You've just got to try and grab her,' said Jack. 'We can't wait. The coach is going to go.'

They heard Greg yelling from the driver's seat.

'Get out of the doorway or I'll kick you out.'

'Hang on,' Ed shouted back. 'They've nearly got it.'

'I can drive with the door open, you know!'

'Frédérique!' Jack snapped. 'You've got to do something!'

22

Frédérique could just see Dior's tail sticking up out of the grass. The poor cat was spooked by the voices, by the noise. If Frédérique had only been left alone to do this by herself she could have got her by now.

How long did she have?

She looked down the road for the first time and her breath caught in her ribs.

The silent mass of adults was almost there. They were bloated by disease, their skin tight, cheekbones massive, lips fat and pulled back from their teeth, as if they'd all had bad plastic surgery. Some of them were completely naked, their sagging flesh swaying from side to side as they staggered onwards.

'Please, Frédérique.' The boy, Jack, sounded like he was going to cry.

Frédérique felt awful. She didn't want to be responsible for anything bad happening.

All right, she told herself. *It was just a cat.*

Just a cat.

Papa would not have wanted her to die because of it.

She would try to pick Dior up. If she ran off, she would leave her behind. That was the only thing to do. Without thinking any more she slid forward, quickly but smoothly, trying to make no sudden movements. Dior stared at her warily, ready to jump aside. At the last moment Frédérique bent down and made a grab for her.

Dior jumped.

Too late.

Frédérique's hands closed around her. The cat struggled and

kicked, gave a wild meow but she was held fast.

Frédérique ran to Jack who was holding the carrying-case ready.

She stuffed Dior in and Jack closed the gate.

'Get on the bus!' Ed shouted. 'Hurry!'

The coach was moving. Ed leant out and hauled Frédérique aboard. The coach picked up speed. Jack threw the cat box to Ed who caught it neatly and dumped it inside.

'Come on, Jack!'

Frédérique stood up and watched out of the window.

Jack was sprinting, his feet slapping on the wet tarmac, his clenched teeth bared in pain and desperation. He stretched out his hand. The coach was pulling away from him.

'Come on!' Ed shouted.

Someone pushed past Frédérique, the big boy, Bam. He took hold of Ed's arm.

'Lean out!'

Ed swung out over the road, fingers plucking at the air. Jack roared and threw himself at Ed who somehow managed to get his fingers round his wrist and pull him on to the step.

The three of them collapsed, Jack panting, Ed and Bam giggling hysterically.

'That was bloody close,' Greg snarled. 'If any of you lot mess me about like that again, I will throw you off this bus and not look back. You got it?'

'You could have waited.' Jack's voice was tight with cold fury.

'You're not the only people on this bus,' Greg spat back at him. 'And don't you forget that. I don't mean me. There's other kids here. You put them all in danger back there. For a cat! A sodding cat!'

'Nobody was hurt,' said Ed, trying to calm the situation down. 'Nobody was in any real danger.'

'Sit down and shut up,' said Greg.

Jack insulted Greg under his breath. Greg realized he'd said something but couldn't tell what.

'You've been on my case ever since you got on this bus,' he said, changing up a gear. 'And I am rapidly beginning not to like you, sonny boy. Not one little bit.'

'The feeling's mutual,' Jack muttered, and went to sit further down the bus. Frédérique and Bam followed.

Ed watched them go. When it came down to it – Greg was right. Jack had put them all in danger. Ed was shaking uncontrollably. He'd been absolutely terrified and was still experiencing an adrenalin rush. It had taken every last scrap of courage he possessed to stay on that step as the grown-ups marched steadily nearer.

And when the coach had started to drive off …

He took a deep breath and swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat.

Greg swerved to avoid something in the road and Ed nearly fell over. He looked for somewhere to sit. All the younger kids had moved to the front of the coach and were sitting with Liam, as close to Greg as they could get. Despite all that had happened, they still looked to grown-ups to protect them and they found the big, powerful figure of Greg reassuring.

Arthur and Wiki sat across the aisle from Liam, Zohra and her little brother Froggie sat behind them, and, next to Liam, a good head taller than the rest of them, was Justin the nerd.

The next three rows of seats were filled by mad Matt and Archie Bishop and the other kids from the chapel. Ed settled down behind them, across from Kwanele and Chris Marker.

He smiled to himself.

The thing was, he hadn't left the step, had he? He hadn't let Greg close the doors. He'd pulled Jack on to the bus. This time he'd saved his friend.

This time he'd done the right thing.

At the front of the coach Arthur was talking as usual. He seemed to have an endless supply of words inside him, just waiting to come pouring out.

'I don't think they would have caught up,' he was saying. 'Those zombies were slow, not like the ones earlier, at The Fez – they were like superzombies, they were really quick, I wonder why some are faster than others, maybe the young ones aren't as badly affected by the disease …'

'I didn't think zombies could run fast,' said Froggie, a look of deep concern on his face.

'Yes, well, technically they're not zombies,' said Justin.

'What d'you mean?' Froggie asked.

'I mean they're not zombies,' Justin went on. 'They're not the living dead.'

'Yes,' said Wiki, 'but a real zombie isn't really dead either. Not a proper one. A proper zombie is someone who's been given a drug to make them appear dead, and then they're revived by the voodoo priest and they have to do his bidding.'

'Well, they're not those type of zombies either, then, are they?' said Justin.

'No.'

'So they're not any type of zombie.'

'What should we call them, then?' Arthur asked. 'We have to call them something. I mean, most of them are grown-ups, we could call

them grown-ups because there aren't any normal grown-ups left, so we'd always know what we were talking about, or we could just call them mothers and fathers, you see like the Scared Kid did? That's what I think of them as, mothers and fathers, though not my real mother and father, they weren't zombies.'

'These ones aren't zombies, either,' Justin insisted. 'That's what I've just been trying to explain.'

'We could call them ghouls,' said Wiki. 'Or demons.'

'What about ogres?' Zohra suggested.

'Or savages,' said Froggie.

'We could call them brutes,' said Wiki.

'I like zombies best,' said Arthur.

'Me too,' agreed Froggie.

'But they're not zombies!' Justin was getting quite angry.

'I know they're not,' said Arthur. 'But they act like zombies, and they walk like zombies, except the ones who can run, the fast ones, and they're stupid like zombies, and they eat people like zombies.'

'Are they a sort of vampire?' said Froggie.

'In a way,' said Wiki. 'They want human flesh, though, not just blood.'

'Why do you think they do?' said Froggie, as casually as if he was discussing the eating habits of a pet guinea pig.

'That's a very good question,' said Justin. 'We should make a proper study of their behaviour. If we can understand them more, we might be able to work out better ways of defending ourselves against them, maybe even defeating them. We're cleverer than them, so that should give us the edge.'

'We may be cleverer,' said Wiki, 'but they're stronger.'

'Clever beats strong every time,' said Justin, pulling a small notebook and a biro out of his pocket. 'So let's make a pact. We'll use our brains to work out the best way to survive. We'll be a brains trust.'

'What's a brains trust?' asked Froggie.

'It's like a think tank.'

'What's a think tank?'

'If we don't even know what it means,' said Arthur, 'I can't see us being the finest minds in the world.'

'Well, we're cleverer than that lot out there,' said Justin.

'You mean the zombies?'

'They are *not* zombies!'

'They're sickos,' Greg growled from the driver's seat. 'That's what I call them. Sickos.'

'Yes,' said Justin, smiling. He wrote the word down in his book and underlined it. '*Sickos*. That's a very good term for them. From now on they're officially not zombies, they're sickos.'

23

Jack felt hot and sweaty. He'd landed badly when Ed and Bam had pulled him on to the bus. He'd scraped his shins on the steps, but couldn't sense any pain yet. It would come, though. That much he knew. He sat down with Frédérique in the same row of seats as Bam and his injured friend, Piers. Piers had been slipping in and out of consciousness since they'd got on the bus. The piece of material that Bam had wrapped round his head was stained every shade of red from bright scarlet to almost black. It had stopped the bleeding but Piers looked chalk white and his face was streaked with dried blood.

Frédérique didn't look much better. She was shaking as if someone had stuck electrodes in her and was passing an electric current through her body. Jack realized he was shaking as well and he had a hollow sick feeling inside. He put his head between his knees and took a few deep breaths. He closed his eyes and waited for the pounding in his head to subside.

Once he was feeling halfway human again he straightened up. For a moment he saw dancing coloured spots and blobs in front of his eyes and his brain felt like it had come loose and turned light and fizzy. He had the sensation that he was floating up out of his body. He gripped his armrest and slowly everything settled down and he was back on the bus.

'You all right?' Bam was giving Jack a concerned look.

'Hard to say.' Jack rubbed his face. 'How's Piers doing?'

Bam made a movement with his hands as if he was weighing something.

'Could be worse. He's sleeping now. I got some water inside him and a bit of food. Crisps, mainly, but it's better than nothing I

suppose. The cut's not too deep, as far as I can tell, but he's lost quite a lot of blood. It's going to be hard to get his strength back up.'

'Have you put anything on the wound? Some antiseptic or anything?'

'Yeah. Greg has a box of stuff. I squirted some Savlon on, that's what my mum always used to do if I had a cut. Savlon and soup.'

'Yuck.'

'Not together. Savlon on the cut and then a hot bowl of soup. Cream of chicken. That's if I was badly mashed-up in a match. Which was nearly every week. I'd kill for some chicken soup right now.'

'Me too.'

'Piers really needs some proper food, though. He can't live on crisps. If we could get hold of some of that smoked meat Greg has stashed away in his cool box, that'd sort him out.'

'You can try,' said Jack. 'He doesn't like me. I doubt it'll do much good, though. Despite what he says he's only really looking after himself and Liam.'

'That his mini-me?'

'Yeah.'

Jack's seat jolted forward as someone bashed into the back of it. There was a girlish laugh and he was aware of bodies crowding behind him.

'Is she your girlfriend?'

It was Brooke and her two mates. Leaning over him, laughing and eyeing Frédérique up and down. Jack wondered why he had ever seen them as a set. They actually looked very different, Courtney big and awkward, Brooke thin and blonde, Aleisha tiny and dark.

'Is she?' Brooke repeated.

'No.'

'What's her name?'

'Frédérique. She's French.'

'We had enough of the French when we was in Calais,' said Courtney. 'France is a dump.'

Jack felt hot anger erupt from his guts. He twisted up out of his seat and confronted the girls, who dropped back in surprise.

'Why don't you lot knock it off? Huh? Why don't you give it a rest? She's been through a lot. Her dad died this morning. She's a human being like you. OK?'

Brooke was the first to get her front back in place. She gave a long drawn-out *Oooooh*, eyebrows raised, mouth in a perfect little circle.

'Definitely your girlfriend then.'

Aleisha put a hand on her friend's arm, making a concerned face.

'He's right, Brooke,' she said. 'Leave it. You don't have to be a bitch all the time. We all need to be friends.'

Brooke looked taken aback. She wasn't sure quite where she stood now.

'I was only joking.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Courtney. 'She looks all right. Are you OK, darling?'

Frédérique nodded without looking round.

Courtney passed her a half-eaten Mars bar.

'D'you want this? I was saving it, but you can have it if you want.'

Frédérique shook her head.

'She'll be OK,' said Aleisha kindly, and she smiled at Frédérique.

'Look,' said Brooke. 'Touching moment and all that, but just so's we know where we all stand – is she your girlfriend, or not?'

'Broo-ooke!' said Aleisha, jutting her head forward.

'What?' said Brooke. 'We need to know.'

'Why would you care?' said Jack. 'Apparently I don't count in your world because of my birthmark. I'm just some kind of freak.'

'So, she *is* your girlfriend then.'

'Oh, forget it.' Jack slumped back into his seat and the girls returned to their camp at the back of the bus arguing loudly with each other.

Frédérique was shaking worse than ever and Jack was about to put his arm round her to reassure her when he realized she was laughing. He couldn't help but join in. This whole situation was so ridiculous. The world was falling apart and people couldn't see outside the little boxes they'd lived in all their lives.

An image of Frédérique's father trying to stand up with a plank of wood nailed to his head came to him and he laughed even harder.

The world didn't make much sense any more.

He leant across Frédérique and drew a smiley face on the window.

24

Chris Marker reached up to the luggage rack to get his bag of books down. He'd finished *Fever Crumb* and needed to start something new. He always felt a bit deflated finishing a book. He'd race to get to the end and then wonder why he hadn't taken it more slowly to make the enjoyment last longer. Of course he could always just turn back to page one and start all over again at the beginning, as he sometimes did. But right now he wanted something new. He searched through the books and chose one he'd grabbed at random in the library because it looked long. It was a heavy fat paperback called *The Gormenghast Trilogy*. Three books in one: *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone*. That should keep him busy for a while.

He sat back down and Kwanele looked over to see what he'd chosen.

'I've not read that,' he said.

Chris grunted. As far as he could tell Kwanele had never read *any* book, unless perhaps it was a history of fashion. Magazines were a different story. Kwanele must have read every fashion magazine ever published in the history of the world. And watched every programme about fashion on the TV. He'd already summed up everyone on board based on their clothing.

The three noisy girls at the back were 'an unholy mix of TopShop, Juicy Couture, JD Sports, Accessorize and Willesden market'.

Zohra and Froggie were 'classic Boden', whatever that was.

Greg and Liam were Next, plus 'inevitably more JD Sports'.

Frédérique, though, apparently 'had style'.

'That coat's an Agnès B,' Kwanele had said approvingly.

He'd been quiet since lunch, drifting in and out of sleep, and Chris

had taken the opportunity to tune in to the conversation that Matt and Archie Bishop were having about their new religion in the seats in front. His book was a prop a lot of the time, so that Chris could spy on people without them realizing.

Matt and Archie seemed to be making it up as they went along, but they were still deadly serious about their religion, discussing each point at great length.

Matt was reading something out from one of his rescued scraps of Bible.

'*And he carried me away … and showed me the Holy City … It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.* What's a jasper?'

'A type of jewel I suppose,' said Archie.

'I think it's significant,' said Matt. 'Why choose a jasper, and not, say, a ruby or an emerald or one of the better-known jewels? It's a code of some sort, I reckon. Maybe we need to look out for a boy called Jasper.'

'Maybe,' said Archie, though he didn't sound convinced.

Matt carried on reading aloud. '*It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates … There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west …* And look, here … *The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper*! Jasper again. I told you it was significant.'

'What else does it say?' Archie asked.

'Erm … *the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald.*'

'There you are, then,' said Archie. 'He says emerald.'

'Yeah, but listen to these others – I've never heard of them – *the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.*'

'I've heard of amethyst.'

'What colour is it?'

'Dunno. Red, maybe?'

'The twelve gates are important,' said Matt. 'Doesn't London have twelve gates? The old city of London.'

'Don't know. Does it?'

'Yes. I used to know them all. There's Ludgate … erm, Old Gate, Newgate, Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Moorgate … I don't remember the rest, but there's definitely twelve.'

Chris shook his head. There were seven gates in London, not twelve. Matt was a fool.

'It's all in here, Archie,' Matt was saying, his voice growing louder

as he got more excited. ‘London, the Lamb, the plague, my vision.’

‘I wish I’d had a vision,’ said one of the acolytes. ‘I’d like to see what the Lamb looks like.’

‘He’s beautiful and frightening at the same time,’ said Matt, and he stood up. ‘He’s going to save us all!’ he cried out.

‘Sit down, Matt,’ said Ed, who was sitting across the way from Chris.

‘I won’t sit down. You all need to accept the Lamb if you want to be saved. The golden child, who is more than a child. I’ve seen him, walking out of the darkness, and all around him is light, and in his shadow walks a demon.’

‘Sit down, Matt.’

Matt left his seat and went over to Ed.

‘You’ll see,’ he said. ‘You’ll see that I’m right. It’s all in the pages, and if you can’t see that then you’re blind. We’re being tested. That’s what all this is about, the disease, the dead, don’t you see? God has sent a plague to wipe out the sinners, to kill the evil-doers. We have to found a new Jerusalem, in London, and welcome the Lamb who will come to save us.’

‘And just how do we welcome him?’ Ed asked.

‘We have to make a sacrifice.’

‘A sacrifice?’ Ed looked amazed.

‘Yes,’ said Matt. ‘The Lamb is ready for sacrifice, but we don’t sacrifice the Lamb, you see, we sacrifice the demon, the beast who walks at his side in the darkness, and then once he’s been cast out, the Lamb will be free and we can all rise into God’s kingdom here on earth.’

This was all too much for Ed, he started to laugh. Matt stood there for a moment, his bony shoulders rising and falling heavily, then he turned away and stalked back to his friends.

Chris was secretly smiling. He didn’t think Matt’s new religion would catch on. After all, he was just a kid.

What did kids know about anything?

He focused his attention back on to his book. He knew the others thought he was weird. Always reading. But the thing was, books were the future now. They held what was left of the world’s knowledge. All the adults were either dead or sick. All those teachers with their knowledge, all those parents, scientists, historians, gone.

There were no more computers now, and wouldn’t be again until the electricity came back on. And how long would that take? What did kids know about generating electricity? Well, if they wanted to find out they were going to have to read books.

First read the books, then build the generators, then switch the computers back on. Probably wouldn’t work after all that time. So

they'd have to build new computers, which would mean reading more books …

And in the meantime, all the gigabytes, zigabytes, mega-ziga-gigabytes of information that had once been stored in all the computers of the world would have vanished.

All that knowledge lost forever. They were back to square one. Well, perhaps not square one. More like the Middle Ages. Before electricity, before the Industrial Revolution, before cars and machines.

When there was just books.

If Chris knew one thing, it was that knowledge is power. And where was all the knowledge in the world right now? In books. So that meant that books were the most powerful objects in the world.

And he was going to use that power. He was going to keep on reading. He had to start collecting encyclopaedias, science books, history, geography, books of facts and figures. He had to start planning for the future.

The scenery rolled past as the afternoon wore on, growing greyer and greyer. The drizzle never let up and their progress was painfully slow. Roads were blocked everywhere and whenever the rain picked up Greg had to slow down to a crawl because of the missing wipers.

Several times they had to stop altogether and the bigger boys would have to get down and physically move cars out of the way while Greg watched out for sickos with his shotgun. Some of the cars still had keys in the ignition, but most didn't. The boys smashed the side windows and then it was Greg who showed them how to disable the steering lock by jamming a screwdriver in behind the steering column. They didn't bother trying to hotwire them, but simply put the cars in neutral and pushed them out of the way.

It was not quick work, though.

The sky steadily darkened as they crisscrossed the dreary streets on the fringes of south London trying to find a way in. Despite the rain there were fires smouldering everywhere, filling the air with smoke that made their going even more difficult.

One by one everyone on the bus fell silent, retreating into their thoughts. Even the three girls at the back piped down. The only voice was Greg's as he muttered under his breath, cursing and swearing.

Liam sat staring at the great solid lump that was the back of his father's head. It was so familiar from countless drives. The pale bristles of his short haircut, the big crease in the skin that ran all the way across his scalp, the red rash where his collar rubbed against his wide neck. Greg always complained that most shirts didn't fit round his neck. The collars were always too tight.

The hours Liam had spent in the back of the car studying this

great fleshy boulder. He took after his dad. He had the biggest head in his class. When he'd had his glasses fitted the optician had been amazed. She said she'd have to give Liam adult frames.

He had a sudden flashback to a memory of when he'd been much smaller. Sitting in the car – not the new Jeep, the old one, the Shogun – and there being two heads in the front.

Mum and Dad.

It must have been a really long time ago.

Mum was gone now, back up to Coventry. She'd moved in with the man from the phone company. Daryl.

Liam visited her three times a year, once on her birthday, once at Christmas and for two weeks in May when Dad went fishing with his mates.

It suited all of them. Mum had never much enjoyed being a mum, and Dad was more fun. He did cool things with Liam. They went to the football, they went fishing, they watched DVDs together – old war films, mostly. They were Dad's favourites: *The Dam Busters, The Great Escape, The Longest Day, Sands of Iwo Jima, The Battle of Britain*.

They walked Charlie on Hampstead Heath. Charlie was a boxer. They'd left him with Uncle Ray when they'd set off down to Kent all those weeks ago. They weren't allowed to take Charlie on to the farms.

Liam wondered if he was all right. Maybe Uncle Ray was like Dad. Maybe he wouldn't get sick. He *hoped* Charlie was all right. He loved him.

He loved his dad as well, even though he sometimes scared Liam. Dad could get really angry and when he was 'in one of his rages' as he called it, Liam had to try to keep out of his way. He was worst when he was driving. He would swear at other drivers and say the most horrible things. Once Liam had been with Dad when he'd got into a fight with another driver.

Dad had had a laugh about it afterwards but Liam had been really shaken up by it. He hated fighting himself, and spent a lot of time at school trying to keep out of the way of bullies. He never told Dad if he was bullied, because he knew Dad would only make it worse. Go round to the bully's house and start a fight or something.

Liam watched as Greg coughed and ran a hand through his hair. A fine spray rose up as he did so, like a mist. Liam thought at first it was water, and then he realized it was a spray of Dad's hair, like when you go to the barber's and they leave all those sort of powdery itchy bits down the back of your neck and in your hair.

There was a bald patch where Greg had rubbed. And right in the middle of the patch was a spot. A single whitehead, glistening and fat with pus.

Liam held his breath.

He didn't want to look, but he had no choice, the spot drew his eyes like a target. And Greg kept scratching at it, scratching and scratching, rubbing off more hair and making the skin around the spot red raw.

Greg coughed again, like he had something caught in his throat. He reached for his plastic water bottle and drank half of it in one long swallow. Dad's party trick was to down a pint of beer in one go. He'd tried teaching Liam how to do it with a glass of water, but it always ended the same way, with Liam choking and Dad laughing.

'You're no son of mine!' he joked.

You only had to look at pictures of Greg as a boy to know that wasn't true, however. The two of them were identical. He supposed he'd be just like Greg when he grew up – strong and tough and not afraid of anything or anyone.

That would be nice.

He looked forward to getting home. It had been awful on the farm. With everyone dying and all that.

And then there was poor Little Paul, the farmer's youngest son. Liam had made friends with him.

He shivered at the memory. He couldn't help it.

Little Paul had got hysterical when his dad and all his older brothers had got sick and Greg had had to shoot them. Little Paul had been like a crazy person. Screaming, shouting, crying. And then he'd gone very quiet. Wouldn't move. Wouldn't talk. Stared at the wall.

Liam remembered how Greg had taken Little Paul out to the barn one night, and when he came back into the house his hands were all wet. He'd washed them.

Little Paul never came back.

Greg coughed, a long fit of it, and spat into a paper coffee cup.

When he rubbed his head again he exposed another bald patch.

There were three more spots on it, nestling in the crease of skin.

Liam felt a coldness creeping up his legs, as if his heart was sucking all the blood back into itself like a sponge. His vision was turning black and white, like an old film.

'Dad …' he said, just before he passed out.

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‘He’s all right, he’s all right, give him air. He’s just fainted. Give him air. Liam … Liam … wake up, son.’

Liam felt a damp hand slapping his face. His eyes fluttered open. What was he doing lying on the floor? Dad’s big face looming over him. Boys and girls crowding round him.

‘You fainted, son, is all. Nothing worse than that. You feeling all right? Get him some water, one of you, come on!’

‘I’m fine, Dad. I’m fine.’

‘What set you off? What happened?’

Liam couldn’t say anything. He looked up at his dad like he was an alien. Someone already dead.

The spots.

The cough.

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t say ‘You’re getting sick, Dad.’ Couldn’t say anything. Because saying it would make it real. And the reality of it was too terrifying to think about. If he didn’t say anything, maybe it wouldn’t happen.

Dad’s face was covered with a thin film of sweat and the whites of his eyes looked yellowish.

It had started like this on the farm. First Big Paul and his wife, and then the older boys.

It could be something else, though, couldn’t it? Couldn’t it? Maybe Dad just had a cold.

That was it. Just a cold.

Liam smiled at his dad who smiled back. Greg coughed and sniffed and wiped his nose. Liam saw a thin smear of blood along his finger. Had anyone else seen it?

Please, no. Not Dad.

'Let's get you up from there, son.'

Greg pulled Liam up off the floor, dusted him down and took him to the front where he sat him in the driver's seat and stood looking out through the rain-spattered windscreen.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' said Liam, feeling like he'd let his dad down and shown weakness in front of the other kids. 'I didn't mean to. You've had to stop the bus and everything. I'm really sorry.'

'We needed to stop anyway, soldier,' said Greg. 'It's getting late and it's getting dark. I wanted to try and push on over the river and get back to Islington tonight, but it ain't gonna happen. I'm knackered, London Bridge is blocked and it's raining too hard. I can't see a bloody thing without the wipers.'

'Can't we get home, Dad? If we go slowly?'

'It's too dangerous. Don't want to hit nothing and damage the coach. It's our lifeline. No, we'll kip down here and hope the rain clears by the morning.' He pressed his face against the glass of the windscreen. 'Don't seem to be no one else about.'

'No, Dad,' Liam pleaded, 'not another night on the bus. We're so close. If you go carefully …'

Greg sighed. 'I *said*, Liam, it's too dangerous. Look at it out there – it's coming down like stair rods. Plus I've got a banging headache. It's been a very stressful day.'

'All right, Dad, you know best.'

Greg turned and winked at him. 'Course I do,' he said. 'Besides, we need to work out what everyone else wants to do. Much as I love 'em all to pieces I ain't having them all back to ours. I don't want to be responsible for nobody but you.'

Greg took a step up the aisle, looking at the rows of faces.

'I don't know where you lot want to go,' he shouted. 'But this ain't a regular bus. I ain't dropping you off all over.'

'I want to go to the London Eye,' said Froggie, and Greg laughed.

'I want to go to the Tower of London,' said Arthur. 'I went there with the school, it was really cool, like a proper castle, I reckon you could be safe there, and there are, like, weapons and everything, and you'd be in a commanding location on the river, that's why William the Conqueror built it there, it's in a commanding position, you could fish for fish, I'm quite a good fisherman, my dad said so, we went this one time to Ireland and I caught a sea bass, it was quite big but the biggest one was –'

'Yeah, yeah, put a sock in it, will you, Jibber-jabber?' said Greg. 'You've not shut up since you got on this bus.'

'Yeah, Jibber-jabber,' said Froggie, 'you talk more than my mum.'

'My dad said I could talk for England,' said Arthur, 'if there was

only an Olympic event, like the talking marathon, you know, like talking instead of walking –'

'Jibber-jabber. Enough!'

'Sorry.'

Ed had come to the front to see what was going on when Liam had collapsed into the aisle and he was now sitting with the Brains Trust.

'I've always said we should stick together,' he said. 'There's safety in numbers. Maybe we should all go to Islington? I don't really know the area but maybe there's somewhere that –'

'You don't really know the area?' Greg interrupted.

'No.'

'You don't really know anything, do you, buster?'

'What?' Ed was taken back. He gave a little unconvincing laugh. 'I know a bit.'

'No, you don't,' Greg sneered. 'None of you do. I don't want you with me. You're a liability.'

'That's not fair.'

'*That's not fair.*' Greg copied Ed. 'Look at you with your floppy hair. Your silver spoon ain't gonna be no use to you now. And what use has all your fancy education been, eh? I'll tell you. No use at all. All mummy and daddy's money down the toilet. Is Latin gonna help you now, eh? Tell me that. You can't, can you? Because you're stupid. That school of yours ain't taught you nothing you can use in real life. I bet you can speak about ten languages, can't you? Maybe play the flute? Toot toot! Well, you're dealing with a new world now, a new enemy. That lot out there, the sickos, they can't speak French, or Spanish, or bleeding German, can they? They can't even speak English no more. All they can do is grunt. You're dealing with morons, and when you're dealing with morons education don't mean nothing. Wake up and smell the blood, Hugh Grant, you can't just go waltzing into Daddy's firm in the city. You need real skills now.'

Greg shouted down the length of the coach at the other kids.

'You wanna come with me? That's fine. Just so long as you can get it into your pretty little heads that I'm in charge, savvy? Because I'm the only one here who can save you.' He tapped his head and started to walk down the aisle.

'Me who left school at sixteen with no qualifications,' he went on. 'Because I know about real life. I know how to work with my hands. I know how to kill and gut an animal. Yeah? Could you do that? Any of you? If you had to? Which you might have to. Could any of you skin a cat?' He stopped and gave a meaningful look to Frédérique, followed by a mocking laugh. 'There's no supermarkets now to serve you your nosh all nicely packaged up in cling film with the blood drained out of

it. No more Marks and Spencer's ready meals. You wanna come with me you're gonna have to learn and learn fast, learn about the real things that matter in life.'

'We're not completely useless,' said Archie Bishop.

'Yeah? You know how to pluck a chicken? Break a rabbit's neck?'

'I do, actually,' said Bam. 'I've been out shooting loads of times. My rabbit stew's the best in Kent. I might not have won any awards for my sausages, like you, but I make a mean stew. My barbecued rabbit kebabs aren't too sloppy, either.'

'You having a laugh, Lord Snooty?'

'Not me,' said Bam. 'I'm a bloody good shot if I say so myself. I grew up in the country, you see, always out yomping round the fields. Plus, last summer I went on an SAS survival course in the holidays. I can build a shelter, set animal traps, net fish … I could live off the land if I had to.'

'I'd like to see you try.'

'No, seriously, I could.'

Greg strode to the front and pulled the door open.

'Go on, then,' he shouted, nodding towards the exit. 'I believe you was on your way to the countryside when I picked you up. Why don't you walk all the way back there and start netting fish, Boris?'

'Change of plan since then,' said Bam. 'Looks like it's the city life for me in the foreseeable. Not sure if there are any rabbits in London, but I know there's foxes. I'm sure I could bag one of them. Can you eat a fox? I suppose in the end you can eat anything if you're hungry enough.'

'You getting out or staying?' Greg asked.

'Staying, thanks,' said Bam cheerfully. 'All for one and one for all and all that. You're stuck with me, I'm afraid, Greg.'

'Yeah, well as I said, just you remember who's in charge and don't get cheeky or I'll give you a slap. This is *my* coach. *My* rules.'

Nobody said anything.

'All right.' Greg coughed. 'Get some sleep. We'll push on in the morning. I'll take you all as far as Islington. After that you're on your own.'

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It was dark on the coach, very dark and very quiet. Except for when the silence was interrupted by distant shouts, or the sound of something smashing. And then there were the other noises, harder to identify, that could have been made by animals or by humans.

Hell, thought Ed, some of the sounds were so weird they could have been made by aliens. That wouldn't have surprised him one bit. Nothing could surprise him any more. If strange green lights appeared in the sky and the next thing bug-eyed freaks with ray guns strolled down the street he wouldn't think twice about it. For all he knew the sickness had come from outer space. It was the first wave of an attack by an alien assault force. Soften everyone up, remove the military threat and enslave the remaining young population.

It made about as much sense as Matt's ideas about the Holy Lamb.

Ed was walking slowly down the aisle checking everyone was all right. It was the least he could do. He still felt guilty that he had escaped from the attack at The Fez and that good friends had been left behind.

Jack was sitting midway down the coach.

'It's rubbish,' he said when Ed drew level with him.

'What is?'

'What Greg was saying. About survival. Just total bullshit.'

'How d'you mean? In what way?'

'Well, it's random, isn't it? Really? Who lives and who dies.'

'Is it?' Ed checked to make sure there was no way that Greg could listen in on their conversation and sat down next to Jack.

'Of course it is,' said Jack. 'It's luck, that's all. Makes no difference one way or the other what skills you've got, what training you've had,

what school you went to. It's like in the First World War, when the soldiers were ordered to go over the top and march towards the German trenches – what difference did their training make? Would a professional soldier with ten years' experience be any less likely to be shot than someone whose first day it was at the front? No. It was pure chance whether you got killed or not. When a bomb goes off, it doesn't choose who it blows up. Do you think any of the survivors thought, yeah, look at me, I'm great, I've survived because I was better than the man standing next to me? I don't know, some of them probably thought God had played a part in it, but from what I've read in history most of the soldiers felt terrible; they felt they didn't deserve to live while so many of their friends had died.'

'That's how I feel,' said Ed. 'Guilty.'

Jack turned away. 'I didn't mean anything by what I was saying, Ed.'

'I know you think I've been a coward, and maybe I have but …'

'I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I didn't mean it.'

'Yes, you did. And I understand why you said it. But … I can't fight, Jack. I can do everything else but I can't fight. In a way Greg's right. Nothing in my life has made me ready for all this.'

'But that's exactly what I'm saying.' Jack was trying not to raise his voice. 'Nothing you did *could* have prepared you for this. You could have left school at sixteen like Greg did and trained as an, I don't know, a plumber, or an electrician, what difference would it have made? Look at the Sullivan brothers – they were big tough guys. They were both boxers. They both did a shed-load of sports and now they're both dead. But two little wimps like Wiki and Jibber-jabber both made it through. What skills do they have that the Sullivans didn't? None. They were just luckier. That's all.'

At the front of the bus Greg was struggling into his coat. He zipped it up, pulled a torch from the pocket and went over to Liam, who was sitting with the Brains Trust.

'I'm just going outside to have a fag and give the bus a once-over. Check the tyres and that.'

'Dad …'

'It's all right, Liam.' Greg smiled. 'Nothing's gonna happen.'

He winked at Liam and climbed down off the bus into the rain.

'He's wrong, you know,' Justin the nerd said to Liam and the other younger kids when Greg was gone. He'd obviously come to the same conclusion as Jack. 'It's not all about trapping rabbits and skinning cats. You don't just need fighters. You need people like us, people who know things, people who know about chemistry and biology and all that kind of thing, people who can make machines

work.'

'But we *do* still need fighters,' said Froggie.

'Yes, of course we do,' Justin went on. 'But you can't just have a society of warriors. What are they going to eat? Where are they going to live? What clothes are they going to wear? You need some fighters for protection, yes, but it'll be like any functioning society, you'll also need farmers to grow food, scientists and engineers and doctors to make things and to keep you healthy, you're going to need artists, musicians and actors to entertain people.'

'Jugglers,' said Jibber-jabber.

'Jugglers? We won't need jugglers.'

'But *they're* entertaining. I like jugglers.'

'Well, learn to juggle, then,' said Justin, 'and you can entertain us all.'

'Maybe I will.'

'What about clowns?' said Froggie. 'Will we need clowns?'

'We'll certainly need people to make us laugh,' said Justin. 'Now more than ever. But the thing is, we need lots of different people with lots of different skills. That's how we can survive, and why we'll defeat the sickos, because we're cleverer than they are, and we can build a society, but they can't. They will eventually die out. They must, because they can never be anything more than dumb animals. That's mankind's greatest weapon – our brains. There are cannibal tribes – there *were* cannibal tribes – that believed that if you ate the brains of your enemy you'd gain their wisdom and power.'

'Lots of cannibals in Papua New Guinea were wiped out by eating human brains,' said Wiki. 'They all caught mad cow disease, well, the human form, CJD.'

Liam was staring at Wiki with wide eyes. 'Is it safe to eat other bits of humans?' he asked quietly.

'Well, it's not a very good idea,' said Wiki. 'We're full of diseases. Most farm animals are given injections and drugs and they're specially bred to be healthy. Most humans are really unhealthy. We're walking bags of disease and germs. Compared to the average cow, anyway.'

'But could you die if you ate someone?'

'Probably not. I don't really know. You'd have to avoid the brains to be sure.'

'The sickos eat people,' said Jibber-jabber. 'And look at them. They're in a terrible state.'

'But they were in a terrible state already,' said Justin. 'They were already sick, that's why they eat people, not the other way round.'

'Why are you so interested, anyway?' Jibber-jabber asked Liam. 'Are you thinking of eating someone?'

'No. I never would. That's why …'

‘That’s why what?’

‘Nothing. But, Dad, you see … I don’t know for sure … But the smoked meat …’

‘Are you trying to say your dad’s eaten someone?’ said Jibber-jabber in a whisper. ‘That’s gross.’

‘No. I don’t know. I hope not. But … The adults and the older kids, on the farm, they all got sick … but Little Paul, he …’

Liam stopped as Greg got back on to the bus and took off his soggy coat. They could feel heat radiating off him, and he smelt ripe and meaty. They none of them smelt great, but Greg was the worst. He put the coat on the back of his seat and joined the boys. He seemed to fill all the space around them, a featureless black shape.

‘You lot need to settle down and go to sleep,’ he said. ‘Stop your yacking. You’re disturbing everyone else.’

‘Sorry,’ said Wiki.

‘And, Liam?’

‘Yes, Dad?’

‘You come and sit with me, son, back here. You need to get a proper night’s rest. You was always the same when you had a sleepover. The other kids’d keep you up and you’d be useless the next day.’

Liam didn’t like to point out that his dad had only ever let him have one sleepover.

‘OK,’ he said, and got up out of his seat.

The others all said goodnight and he went with his dad to a quieter section of the coach where they snuggled down next to each other. Greg tucked a blanket round Liam and slipped an arm across his shoulders, giving him a squeeze.

‘That’s better, isn’t it?’ he said, and started to cough, bent over, his whole body shaking, still holding Liam tight.

‘Are you all right, Dad?’

‘Course I’m all right. It’s the dry air on this bus. I wish we didn’t have to have the heater on all the time. It dries me throat out, but if I turn it down the girls get cold. No, I’m fine.’

‘Good. I don’t want you to get ill, Dad.’

‘Hey, hey, hey, that’s enough of that. I’m the one supposed to be looking after *you*, remember. Not the other way round. Now, that’s enough chat. You just need to get some sleep.’

‘I don’t know if I can, Dad. I’m scared.’

‘Don’t be scared. Nothing’s gonna happen to you so long as I’m around.’ Greg coughed again and Liam heard him swallow a mouthful of phlegm.

‘But what’s going to happen to us, Dad? When we get to Islington? I’ve always just been thinking “let’s get home”, but what then? What

are we going to do?'

Greg was about to say something when he was gripped by another attack of coughing. Afterwards he held Liam even tighter. His body felt hot and damp and he was sweating buckets.

Greg had always told him that there wasn't a god, but Liam prayed now.

Please let him be all right …

At the back of the bus Courtney and Aleisha were asleep, but Brooke was wide awake. Staring out at a London that lay black and mysterious under the starless sky. She felt like she'd been on this coach forever, and she never wanted to leave it. She could live on here quite happily till the end of her life, eating crisps and sweets. Safe. They had a loo. They had water. They could be like gypsies.

Except they'd grow fat and stinky, the water would run out, the loo would overflow, they'd fight over the last packet of crisps …

Stop it, Brooke. Don't think like that.

She wished she could sleep. She didn't like it when she was left alone like this. She needed the constant noise and distraction of her friends. She didn't want to think about anything.

She loved her friends. As long as they were all together they were invincible. Too invincible sometimes. When she felt untouchable, she often went too far. She wished she didn't say such harsh things all over the place. But she didn't like anyone to get too close. She kept intruders out with sarcasm and insults and ragging. She wished she didn't do it, didn't try to own everyone she met. She did it without thinking, without really meaning to, even if she liked someone. Like the boys they'd picked up. Some of them seemed OK. All right, they were a bit posh, but you couldn't be too picky these days. Ed was nice, fit-looking, Jack was OK – if he didn't have that butters red thing on his face she could have quite fancied him. For sure he was a bit moody, but she quite liked that in a boy. Sometimes the easy happy ones could be well boring. Maybe Ed was boring? She didn't know; she'd kept him away with her big mouth. She'd kept them both away.

As usual.

Well done, Brooke.

She told herself she'd make an effort tomorrow. Especially as it now looked like they were all going to be staying together. She'd never held out much hope for Willesden. She didn't really care if she never saw the dump again. There was nothing for her there, after all.

She looked across at the sleeping bodies of her friends, slumped against each other. Not a care in the world. What did they know about anything? Brooke had had to get used to sickness and death long before they ever did.

There it was. Every night she came back to this place. Thinking about her mum.

Missing her mum.

She'd been sixteen when she'd had Brooke. She was still at school, though she left soon after. Brooke had never met her dad, and Mum never talked about him, just referred to him as 'the tosser'. Brooke and her mum had been very close, sharing everything, having a laugh, the two of them against the world. She was more of a sister than a mother. She'd been very pretty, always a new boyfriend on the go, with a flashier car than the last one, more money to throw around. They couldn't ever believe that Brooke was her daughter. One had even tried it on with her, but Brooke had told her mum and she'd never seen him again.

Mum was like that. She looked after Brooke, always took her side, always believed her. Not like some of her friends' mums. They could be right cows. Mum had been tough and funny and kind and clever, all the things a mum should be, but what difference had any of that made when she'd got the cancer in one of her breasts?

People said she was very brave. But it didn't help. She had surgery and every kind of treatment the National Health could throw at her.

And eight months later she was dead.

Nothing had been right since then.

What use was all that love when the person wasn't there no more? It just went bad. Brooke had turned hard and mean and nasty, not caring what she said to anyone. Not caring what anyone thought of her. Except her friends. They were a kind of family now, the three of them. Brooke was the dad. Aleisha the mum, always fussing over them, too nice for her own good. And Courtney was the grumpy teenager, moody and moaning about everything.

She didn't love them the way she'd loved her mum, though. She didn't think she'd ever love anyone ever again, not like that. She was never going to let anyone get that close to her, because people died, and there was nothing you could do to bring them back.

She missed her mum so bad. All that Brooke really wanted in the world was for someone to wrap her up inside their love. She'd cried when she saw Greg settle down with Liam.

Some people were just luckier than others, she supposed.

Greg was still holding Liam tight, and murmuring into his ear, his voice low and soft, the voice he used to tell Liam bedtime stories. He always made them up himself, didn't really like story books. He was good at it; he made the stories really exciting, doing all the voices and sound effects. A lot of the stories were based on the war films they'd watched together, but he also told Liam about history: Nelson and

Wellington, the British Empire, the Charge of the Light Brigade, battles won and lost, about brave soldiers, about Iraq and Afghanistan and somewhere called Wootton Bassett. Liam didn't care what the stories were about; it was just nice being alone with his dad in the cosy darkness, and having him all to himself.

Greg wasn't telling a story tonight, though. He was trying to make Liam feel safe and unafraid. Dad would have made a good soldier, a brave captain or a general, looking after his men.

It felt good, hearing his voice, the same as all those nights for as long as he could remember. 'I love you, Liam,' he was saying. 'I wouldn't never let anyone hurt you. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'You're mine, see? *My* boy. And out there. Out in the world, there are people who want to hurt you. But they can't as long as you're with me. Nothing can ever hurt you. I'm your dad, Liam. That means a lot – a boy and his dad. Haven't I always done well for you, looked out for you? Haven't we always had a laugh together, eh? Going to the Arsenal, sitting side by side. Wish I could have taken you back when it was standing. What a crowd that was!'

'I'd like to have seen that, Dad.'

'Yeah. I remember going with *my* dad. The two of us, squashed in, but I always knew I'd be OK, 'cause he was with me, watching over me. That's where a son should be, Liam, by his dad's side. That's why you had to stay with me when your mum walked out on us. She would never have known how to look after you, bring you up proper, bring you up to be a proper man like your dad.'

'No.'

'Only dads know how to bring up boys.'

Greg coughed, and as he did so his arm tightened about Liam's neck.

'It's my job as a dad,' he said when he'd recovered, 'to make sure that nobody can ever hurt you.'

'Yeah … actually, Dad, you're hurting me a bit now.' Liam gave a little laugh. But he was serious. Dad's arm was choking him.

'Nah. I ain't hurting you, Liam, you silly sod,' Greg said, and he too chuckled. 'I'm holding you. That's all.'

'Yeah …'

'Everything's all right. See? I'm just holding you by my side. Where you belong. You'll always be by my side. A boy and his dad. You and me, eh, Liam?'

Greg groaned and dropped his head between his knees. He was shivering, although he felt almost too hot to touch. Liam was sweating himself where his dad's body was pressed against him.

'Are you sure you're all right, Dad?' Liam asked quietly, the words

falling heavily.

'I've got a real bastard of a headache, son. Feels like my head's splitting open. Makes it hard to think what's the right thing to do, but I'm OK. I always do the right thing, don't I? Always do the right thing. Always look after you. My little whassname … whassname … God. Forgot your name for a moment there, son. Silly old fart. Losing my memory in my old age. Losing my marbles. Cuh, there's words in there, son, slippery as eels. I'm just trying to catch them. Eel Pie Island. Yeah …'

Greg fell silent and Liam didn't know what to say. Dad was acting strangely, not making sense. His arm felt heavy as lead across his shoulders. For a long while Greg said nothing and didn't move, just sat there, breathing heavily. Liam wondered if he'd fallen asleep.

He tried to move his dad's arm away.

'Leave it,' Dad mumbled. 'I'm protecting you, Liam … See! I know your name. Lee Am. I need to keep my arm round you, so's you're safe. Nobody is ever going to hurt you as long as I've got a breath in my body. The world was always a bad place and it ain't getting any better, but at least it's getting simpler. There's not so much to understand, just kill or be killed, survival of the fittest, eat or die. Meat Is Life. You know that, don't you? It's written on the front of my, whassname, ship.'

'Your shop?'

'Yeah. We don't have to worry no more about taxes and laws and the congestion charge and *Newsnight* and *Question Time*, you won't never have to learn French at school or maths – I've always been good at maths; you have to be if you're a shopkeeper – and inflation, that don't exist no more, or the credit crunch or sub-prime mortgages or nucular war. You don't have to worry about books and instructions and how to upgrade your phone and all that rubbish, none of it means nothing no more, just be strong and eat to live. I'll be strong for you, Liam. I know you find it hard to be tough, to be a little man, and maybe if we'd kept up with the footie training you'd have got good at it, but none of that matters no more now. All that matters is … What's the matter? What's the, er … Yeah, what matters is that you can't be hurt no more, you can't be scared no more. You can just lie there asleep in my arms, Liam, where you'll always be safe …'

'Please, Dad, I can't breathe, you're hurting me, you're squashing my neck.'

'Shh, shh, don't talk no more. Just go to sleep, Liam. As long as you're asleep nothing can hurt you …'

'Dad …'

Greg put his hand across Liam's mouth, silencing him. 'There, that's better. Quiet now,' he said, and whimpered softly, like an

animal. ‘I can feel fingers inside my head, Liam, tearing it all away. And if I ain’t here to look after you …’

Liam made a muffled noise, ‘D’d …’

‘Go to sleep, my darling boy.’

27

It was still raining when they woke up, stiff and cold, wrapped in an assortment of coats and blankets, sleeping bags, duvets and whatever else they'd been able to find to keep warm under. Jack groaned and rocked his head on his neck, trying to ease out a knotted muscle. By habit he pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, then sighed. He showed it to Ed who was coughing and sniffing at his side.

'Look at that,' he said, holding up the blank, dead screen. 'I'm so used to telling the time by my phone. Used to do everything on it. My whole life was on here. My photos, my music, all my contacts. Don't even know why I hang on to it. It's never going to come back to life, is it? I sometimes think about all those satellites up there, floating about uselessly, cut off from Earth. What do you suppose'll happen to them? Will they fall down? I never could get my head round satellites, how they stay in orbit.'

'They'll stay up there.' Ed coughed again, clearing phlegm from his sore throat. 'Once you're in orbit you stay in orbit. They'll be dead, though, just like your phone. I chucked mine out ages ago.'

'Yeah, it's just a sort of comfort thing, I guess,' said Jack, turning his battered old phone in his hands. 'Like Floppy Dog.'

'You've lost me. What are you talking about?'

'Floppy Dog.'

'You say that like I'm supposed to know what it means.'

'Come on!' Jack laughed. 'I must have told you about Floppy Dog.'

'Nope. Not that I can remember.'

'It was this stupid stuffed toy dog I used to have when I was a kid. It had these long black fluffy ears that were kind of like silky. I used to stroke one of the ears, at night, in bed. It was very reassuring, the feel

of it, the softness, the smoothness.' Jack closed his eyes and smiled. 'I can still feel it now. I rubbed its right ear smooth, rubbed it half away by the end. I couldn't live without him. It was a major alert if Floppy Dog ever went missing. National emergency.'

'What happened to him?'

'In the end, it was weird, one day … I don't know how it happened … I went to bed without him, without even thinking. And that was that. Spell broken. I'm not gonna tell you how old I was, but after that – no more Floppy Dog.'

'It's all right,' said Ed, 'your secret's safe with me.'

'It better be.' Jack tossed his phone up and caught it neatly. 'What time do you make it, anyway?' he said.

Ed looked at his watch. 'Nearly six o'clock,' he said. They were all used to going to sleep and waking up at different hours these days, tuned to the rhythm of light and dark. So six o'clock didn't seem as barbaric as it once would have.

Jack looked out of the windows. They were parked in the middle of the road on a faceless backstreet. What a miserable day. Rain was dripping off everything and splashing into the puddles that ran along the side of the pavement. There was no one to unblock the drains any more. The water just lay there.

'What are you going to do, Ed?' he asked.

'How d'you mean?'

'You going to Islington with everyone else?'

'Suppose so. Best to stick together. Aren't you?'

Jack tapped on the window. 'We're in south London, Ed. Haven't got across the river yet. Now's my chance. Clapham's just a few miles west of here. Wouldn't take me long to walk it.'

'But you can't go there by yourself,' said Ed. 'I thought after what happened …'

'I haven't changed my mind.' Jack sounded very sure of himself. 'But I don't have to go it alone. You could come with me, you and Bam. Why's it going to be any different in north London? You've just got it into your head that it's safe on the coach and you don't want to get off it.'

'I know …' Ed ran his fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. 'I suppose I hadn't really thought beyond trying to stay as a gang. You really are a stubborn git, aren't you?'

'Quite frankly,' said Jack, lowering his voice and leaning in towards Ed, 'the sooner I get away from Lord Greg Almighty the better.'

'I know what you mean.'

'So, come with me, eh?'

'I thought you didn't want me around, Jack. You reckon I can't

fight. You think I'm a coward. Why would you want me along?'

'Look, I said some stupid things yesterday, Ed. I was tired. You know what it's like. The thing is, I *do* want you around. You're my mate.'

'But I'm not any good in a fight,' said Ed. 'I'm just not.'

Jack stood up. 'You'll learn,' he said.

'I'll need to talk to Bam,' said Ed.

'We'll be OK, Ed.' Jack squeezed past Ed. 'The three of us. We won't have the smaller kids and the nerds to look after.'

'What about Piers? He won't get far with that head injury, and I don't think Bam would leave him behind.'

Jack stopped. Swore. 'I forgot about him. Maybe the girls could look after him?'

Ed laughed. 'I don't think so.'

'Well, sort it out with Bam. Make a decision of some sort. I'm going to go and talk to his lordship up front.'

Jack yawned and made his way to the front of the coach. He had to step over Liam who was lying in the aisle wrapped in a blanket, Greg's jacket under his head for a pillow.

Greg was sitting in the driver's seat with his shotgun in his lap, staring straight ahead through the rain-streaked windscreen. He was still as a statue, but as Jack got close he suddenly burst into a wild coughing fit that ended with him spitting into the stairwell.

Jack stopped and took a deep breath. It wasn't good when an adult coughed like that. It usually meant only one thing. He let his breath out slowly and stepped closer.

'Do you know exactly where we are?' he asked, hoping for the best.

Greg ignored him. Just sat there.

'Is this, like, Borough, or somewhere?' Jack pressed on.

Nothing.

'Greg?'

Just the rain, tapping on the roof.

'Are you all right?'

There was a sound somewhere between a shriek and a sob. Jack turned round. Zohra was with Liam, trying to wake him.

'There's something the matter with him,' she said. 'He won't wake up.'

'What?' Jack felt very cold suddenly.

'What's happened to him? Why won't he wake up?'

'Get some water, splash his face maybe.'

'He won't move.'

'Put him in the recovery position.'

'LEAVE HIM ALONE!'

Greg's voice sounded uncomfortably loud in the cramped confines of the bus. Everyone fell silent.

Still Greg wouldn't turn round.

Jack went over to Liam and knelt down. He shook him. He felt frozen. Jack lifted his face. His lips were blue, his eyes wide open and staring, slightly bulging. There were red marks and bruising round his neck.

'He's dead,' he said to nobody in particular.

'I said leave him alone!' Greg snarled. 'Don't touch him. Don't go anywhere near him. I'm looking after him. You're none of you fit to be anywhere near him.'

'He's dead,' Jack repeated.

'He's all right.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing happened.'

'You were with him last night,' said Jack accusingly. 'What happened to him?'

'HE'S ALL RIGHT!'

At last Greg turned round and stood up. His face was greasy with sweat, his eyes and nostrils red-rimmed. There were white spots around his mouth. But the thing Jack found most disturbing was that he was wearing Liam's wire-rimmed glasses.

'Why are you wearing them?' he asked.

Greg put his hand to his face.

'The sun was too bright,' he said, blinking. 'I needed to put me dark glasses on.'

Jack was gripped by a cold, hard fury. 'You're sick,' he said accusingly. 'You've got the disease. You're just like all the rest.'

'I ain't sick. I'm fine.'

'Look at yourself, Greg. Look in the mirror. You've got the disease.' Now Jack pointed to Liam's lifeless body. He was shaking with rage, his finger waving. He knew Greg was dangerous. He knew he should be careful, be clever like Ed, but he couldn't stop himself.

'Did you do this?' he asked. 'To Liam? Did you?'

'I was protecting him,' Greg croaked. 'So nobody can ever hurt him. If I ain't around to look after him what was he gonna do? He was always gentle, my little Liam, never a tough nut like me. Couldn't look after himself. He would have got hurt. He was the sweetest, kindest boy. And now he always will be.'

'Greg …'

'Shut up! Sit down and shut up. I said I was going to get us all to Islington and I will. I'm taking Liam home.'

He aimed his shotgun at Jack, who backed into a seat, shaking worse than ever.

‘That’s better,’ said Greg, showing both barrels to everyone on the bus. ‘Now, all of you, stay where you are, sitting down. Don’t talk to the driver when the bus is in motion, or the driver will shoot you. Got that?’

Greg returned to his seat and started the engine. A spray of rain rattled down the side of the coach, which rocked as a blast of wind rolled over it. Jack realized with dismay that Greg would virtually be driving blind.

As the coach eased forward Ed nipped up the aisle and tucked in next to Jack.

‘He’s lost it,’ he said quietly.

‘Big time.’

‘What are we going to do?’ Ed asked.

‘Just sit tight and wait for our moment. He’s not gonna get far like this.’

‘He killed Liam?’

‘Looks like it. And he’ll probably kill the rest of us if we don’t stop him somehow.’

Greg moved the bus up through the gears, so that they were soon thundering along through the cluttered streets of south London. Too fast. Greg was completely out of control.

There was a thump and a grinding crunch as they hit something on one side, but Greg just speeded up. Someone screamed, and Zohra started wailing. They were all being thrown about in their seats. Jack pressed his face to the side window and tried to get his bearings.

‘Where’s he taking us?’ Ed asked. ‘Can you tell?’

‘Not sure. We’re somewhere near London Bridge, I think. But I reckon we’re heading south, away from the river. It’s so hard to tell around here. None of the roads go in a straight line.’

There was another terrific bang and the coach lurched sideways across the road. Greg wrestled with the wheel.

‘This is crazy,’ Jack said, standing up and climbing over Ed.

‘Jack, no …’

Jack fought his way to the front, rocking from side to side, stumbling into the seats.

‘Stop the bus!’ he yelled. By way of a reply Greg flung an arm back and fired off a round from his gun. It went wild, peppering the ceiling with shot, but Jack threw himself to the ground and lay pressed against the carpeted floor.

‘Sit down!’ Greg yelled, still waving the gun around.

Jack stayed there, hoping that Greg might at least slow down. It was clear, though, that nothing short of a major accident was going to stop him.

Jack made a decision.

If the bus hit something head on, he'd be thrown forward head first along the aisle like a torpedo.

He started to crawl. Inch by inch along the floor. Hoping that Greg wouldn't notice him in the big convex mirror that gave the driver a view of the entire bus interior. He passed Liam's body, tried not to think about what Greg had done to him, carried on.

The bus went way too fast over an obstacle, a speed bump maybe, and Jack was flipped up into the air and landed with a thud. He heard something scraping all the way along the underside. Still he crept forward, his eyes fixed on the shotgun that Greg was waving blindly in the air.

Greg couldn't drive properly like this, and neither could he aim properly. Sooner rather than later either they were going to crash or Greg was going to loose off a shot that would hit one of the kids.

Jack had to keep going.

At last he reached the front. Greg was close enough to touch. Jack picked his moment and then forced himself up from the floor. He shunted Greg's gun arm out of the way and grabbed his wrist. There was a bang as Greg squeezed the trigger. Shot raked the windscreen and punched a hole in the door.

But that was it. The gun only held two shells at a time. If Greg wanted to shoot again, he would have to reload first and Jack wasn't going to give him the chance. He wrenched the weapon out of Greg's grasp and butted the stock into the side of his head. Green snot exploded from Greg's nose and he fell away from Jack as the coach slewed across the road, hurling Jack down the steps. For a few seconds the coach ploughed on, sideways, filling the street from pavement to pavement, its tyres screaming. Then there came a final almighty smash as it hit some parked cars and they at last stopped moving.

From his position sprawled in the stairwell Jack could see smoke and steam rising outside.

Ed unbuckled his belt, ran along the aisle and pulled Jack up out of the stairwell and on to his feet.

'Well done!' He grinned at his friend who looked shaken and a little disorientated.

But Greg wasn't finished. With a roar, he surged out of his seat and punched Ed out of the way with a meaty forearm, trying to get to Jack.

Jack aimed a wild kick at Greg; it got him in the knee. Greg yelled and swung back at him, a vicious right hook that, if it had connected, would have knocked Jack's head off. But Jack managed to duck and scurry away backwards up the aisle, dragging Ed with him.

Greg went into a low crouch, arms outstretched, his red eyes

burning with hatred and rage. There was blood drooling from his mouth – whether from Jack's blow to his head or from internal bleeding deeper in his guts, it was impossible to tell. He coughed, spraying blood and mucus over the kids at the front of the coach who were up out of their seats and retreating from him in a pack like startled ducklings.

Greg belched, causing a big brown bubble to form between his lips. It burst, filling the coach with a foul stench. He wiped his mouth and then spat a gobbet of rubbery mucus against a window, where it slowly crawled down like a fat yellow slug.

'If Liam ain't gonna live,' he slobbered, 'none of you deserve to live. NONE OF YOU. I'm gonna rip you to pieces.'

28

Brooke was lying in a confusion of spilt and scattered boxes at the back of the bus, half buried beneath packets of crisps and biscuits. A can of beans had hit her in the back of the head and for a moment she wasn't sure where she was. Then Courtney pulled her out and she quickly caught up with what was going on. Greg was advancing down the aisle, forcing the panicked kids ahead of him. Brooke swore and looked round for some way to escape the chaos.

Fixed above the window was a sort of little metal hammer thing in a glass case.

'Look,' she said, twisting Courtney round. 'Let's smash the glass and get out of here.'

'Do it!' said Courtney.

Brooke jumped on the seat and used her elbow to break the thin glass covering the hammer and then fumbled to remove it from the clips that held it in place.

'Let go, you stupid thing.'

At last she got her fingers round it and tore it free.

'Hurry up!' Aleisha was watching Greg slowly make his way up the bus. Kids spilling from their seats and falling over each other to keep ahead of him.

Brooke swung the hammer.

Too weedy. It just bounced off.

Useless.

'Harder!' yelled Courtney. 'Do it harder.'

'I know!' Brooke snapped. 'Give me a chance.' She pulled her arm right back, bared her teeth and grunted like a tennis player as she swung again. This time there was a satisfying crack as the window

turned into a thousand glittering diamonds. Another hit and the bits of shattered glass dropped out, clattering and tinkling.

Brooke bustled to the window then jumped back with a cry.

There were sickos outside.

About ten of them, crowding around the coach, mothers and fathers, a couple of teenagers, in a much worse state than Greg. One of them reached up towards the broken window and took hold of the sill. He was a mess. His cheeks had either been torn through, or had rotted away so that his lower jaw dangled down, no longer attached to the upper jaw. His head tilted back and his long pink tongue poked out like he was a living Pez dispenser.

'We're trapped,' Brooke yelled, swiping at the father's fingers with the hammer. The other two girls crowded round her to look outside. The sickos were getting excited. They started whining and battering the sides of the coach with their fists. BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG …

Greg came on down the aisle, dribbling, coughing, belching, arms wide.

Matt was standing his ground in the aisle as the smaller kids surged past him. He was clutching a handful of the torn pages from his Bible.

'Greg! Stop!' he said, raising an open palm. 'It doesn't have to be like this. I can help you. The Lamb can cure you. He can make you better. The Lamb can –'

Greg lashed out at him with a scything backhander. The slap took Matt full in the face and Greg's signet ring tore a bloody gash from his eyebrow up into his hairline. Matt went flying and fell down heavily between the seats.

Zohra, Froggie and Jibber-jabber used the distraction to run to the toilet. They wrenched the door open and darted inside, frantically scrabbling to lock the door behind them.

Greg snarled and punched his fist through the top of the door. It stuck there, halting him for a moment. He tugged and bellowed and shook like a dog arguing over a bone. Splintered chipboard and plastic tore at his forearm as he tried to pull it free. The cries of the little kids sounded small and distant inside the toilet.

Greg let out a string of obscenities and looked like he might wrench the whole door off its hinges.

'Out of the way! Coming through!' It was Bam, charging down the aisle, head lowered, shoulder braced, for all the world as if he was on the rugby pitch going into a tackle.

Greg looked round just as Bam barged into him and the two of them collapsed in a tangle.

'Get the gun!' Bam yelled, trying to keep Greg down. Bam was big

and strong and heavy, but Greg was heavier and filled with a mad fury. He flailed and spat at Bam, who clung on to him.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG … The sickos outside continued their hammering on the side of the coach.

Jack vaulted over the writhing bodies in the aisle and sped to the front of the coach. He picked the gun up from where it was lying on the floor and looked around for some shells.

There was a messy driver's shelf full of tissues and old sweets and CD cases and maps. Jack tore into it, tossing stuff aside, his hands feeling slow and clumsy. It was hard to think straight with the screams of the kids, the banging from outside, the rain lashing the roof.

'Come on, come on …'

There. He'd picked it up and tossed it aside before he realized what it was. A box of shotgun shells. He'd never loaded a gun before but had seen it done enough times in films and on the TV for him to have a pretty good idea what to do. You sort of bent the gun in half and shoved the cartridges in the back end of the barrels. He couldn't for the life of him work out how to break the gun, though.

He let loose a string of obscenities.

It must have a catch or a lock of some kind.

There was a shout and he looked round to see Greg forcing himself to his feet, throwing off Bam. He moved awkwardly. It looked like the arm that had been stuck in the toilet door was dislocated. He turned his whole upper body to his right, as if his head could no longer swivel on his neck.

Chris Marker was sitting there, frozen in the act of reading his book.

Two pairs of eyes locked.

Chris slowly stood up and backed away until he was flattened against the window, his book open in his hands.

Greg was breathing heavily, blinking, angry and bewildered. He glared at the book. Focusing all his hatred on it.

Chris calmly closed the covers and then in one swift movement smashed the book's spine into the bridge of Greg's nose like a brick, knocking the glass out of Liam's spectacles. Greg grunted and staggered back on stiff legs before collapsing on to the seats on the other side of the aisle.

'Come on,' Ed yelled, helping the little kids out of the toilet. 'Everyone off the bus.'

'No!' Brooke shouted. 'There's more of them out there.'

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG …

Bam limped over to Jack and took the gun off him. He quickly found the release catch and thumbed it forward. He grinned at Jack and broke the gun over his knee before slotting two of the shells into

the twin barrels.

He looked back at Ed, who was halfway down the coach.

'I'll clear the way outside. You bring Piers!' he shouted, shoving the rest of the shells into his pocket. He kicked the damaged door open.

'Stay with me!' he commanded, and stepped off.

There were two blasts.

'Quickly!' Jack jumped down after Bam, and the others followed, jostling each other to get off the coach before Greg recovered.

Ed put a hand on Kwanele's shoulder as he pushed past, wheeling his luggage. 'Help me,' he said.

'Me?'

'Yes, you! I can't carry Piers by myself.'

'He's bleeding. It'll ruin my suit.'

'Just shut up and help.'

They took one of Piers' arms each and pulled him up out of his seat. He felt like a dead weight. Kwanele cursed as his suitcase got entangled with the legs of one of the seats. Piers gasped and winced in pain, his eyes flickering open.

'It's all right,' said Ed. 'We're getting you off the bus, mate.'

They dragged him along the aisle. Blocking Brooke and her friends who were struggling forward over the scattered boxes.

'Hurry up,' Courtney wailed.

Brooke was shaking uncontrollably. She'd seen what was outside. The boys hadn't. If they got split up, it would be a disaster and she definitely didn't want to be left on the coach by herself.

As they passed Greg, he looked up at them.

'Stay where you are,' he said, his voice rattling with mucus. He lunged up towards Brooke who shrieked and punched the hammer into his gut. The air went out of him with an *OOF* and he doubled over in pain.

The girls pushed past Ed and ran the rest of the way to the doors, nearly falling down the steps in their hurry. Outside in the rain Bam was reloading the shotgun. There were two sickos lying on the pavement, a mother and a teenager, the rest were cowering near at the back of the bus. Pez was with them. His head rocked back and his horrible pink tongue stuck out.

'Move it,' Bam shouted at the girls. 'Get away while you can.'

29

Ed and Kwanele had nearly made it to the doors, but it was hard going. Piers had passed out again and Kwanele was having trouble holding him up with one arm and wheeling his suitcase with the other. He called for help, but everyone else was already running away from the bus.

'They've forgotten about us,' Kwanele wailed.

'Shut up and keep going,' Ed grunted. 'We can't just leave him.'

There was a noise behind them. Greg was up again. Trying to work out where everyone had gone.

He spotted the boys.

'Forget it,' said Kwanele. 'I'm out of here.'

He dropped Piers. Ed screamed at him but he bolted off the bus and ran after the others.

Ed was left holding Piers' arm. 'Piers,' he sobbed. 'Come on, Piers, help me … Help me …'

But Piers was dead to the world.

Greg was moving slowly towards them. He looked cross-eyed, more confused than ever, his face a mask of blood and pus. Liquid was gurgling in his throat. His breath was rasping and harsh.

With a superhuman effort Ed got Piers as far as the doors, but then he wouldn't budge any further. Ed tugged at him, and tugged at him, but it made no difference. In his panic he couldn't work out what had happened. He hadn't spotted that Piers' jacket had caught on a handle.

'Piers,' he shouted. 'Piers, come on. Wake up!'

Greg was getting nearer by the second, his lips curled back from his bloody teeth. He reached out with his good hand towards Ed and

seemed to smile.

Ed looked out. Three big sickos were approaching the doorway. In another moment his way out would be blocked altogether. There was no sign of his friends.

'Piers,' he yelled, uselessly jerking the boy's body. Ed was crying in desperation. Greg was so close now he could smell him.

Ed let go.

'Sorry,' he said, relieved that Piers was unconscious and would have no idea what was going on.

He jumped off the bus, shoved past the sickos in the street and ran for it. Behind him he could hear Greg raging and roaring, fighting the other adults over Piers' body.

Ed kept moving, all the while glancing wildly around for a glimpse of the others. There was a bang and he turned towards the sound. The kids were a little way along the road. Most of them were scrambling over a fence beside a tall white gatepost, while Bam and Jack fought off a second, smaller band of sickos. The noise had been Bam shooting at one of them.

'Hey!' Ed shouted. 'Wait for me.'

They either didn't hear him or they ignored him.

Ed sprinted to catch up, feeling sick that he'd abandoned Piers. Bam and Jack were frantically trying to keep the sickos back. There were about six of them, clawing at the boys, snapping their yellow teeth. They were too close for Bam to fire the gun again and he was using it as a club.

With a yell Ed piled into them, scattering them and knocking two of them over. Bam saw his chance and shot another one.

'Get over the fence,' Jack shouted. 'They can't follow us.'

Ed vaulted the fence into the small park on the other side. Ahead of him were two massive grey naval guns that must each have been a good six metres long. They stood in front of a building, making it look like some weird stranded battleship. The building was grand and classical in design, with six pillars across the front and a very tall, narrow green dome jutting straight up at the top.

With a shock of recognition Ed realized he'd been here before with his prep school. It was the Imperial War Museum.

Jack and Bam followed him over the fence. Bam reloaded and turned to fire a last shot at the sickos on the other side. Not that it mattered. They didn't have the sense to work out how to get over.

The three boys ran along the path towards where their friends were waiting for them by the naval guns, lungs burning, rain stinging their faces, their feet slapping on the wet paving stones. Jack and Ed ran side by side, Bam slightly behind.

'What happened to Piers?' Jack panted.

‘You didn’t wait,’ Ed replied.

‘You left him?’

‘Kwanele ran off. I couldn’t do it by myself. You should have stayed.’

‘I was helping the others.’

‘You should have stayed.’ Ed arrived at the steps to the museum and stopped, doubled over, resting his hands on his knees. The rest of the kids were hammering on the doors. Kwanele was with them, looking sheepish, his suitcase at his side.

Ed gave him a dirty look. ‘Thanks for your help, Kwanele.’

‘What difference would it have made?’ Kwanele protested. ‘Even if we *had* got him off the bus? We could not have got away.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘The point is we are both still alive.’

‘Which is more than can be said for Piers.’

By now Bam had registered that Piers was missing. ‘Where is he?’ he asked accusingly.

‘We had to leave him on the bus,’ Ed explained. ‘We couldn’t move him.’

Before Bam could say anything else there was a cheer. Someone inside the building had opened the doors. The kids bundled noisily inside.

Ed hung back for a while, regaining his breath, pulling himself together, not wanting to have to face Bam and Jack. Then walked slowly into the museum past two boys in old army uniforms who were holding the doors open.

Inside he crossed a small entrance area, up some more steps and came out into the main atrium. There were planes dangling from the ceiling. Jack recognized a Spitfire among them. The white-tiled floor was littered with tanks, vehicles and artillery pieces of all shapes and sizes.

The rest of the kids from the coach were gazing around in open-mouthed awe. A small group of boys were staring sullenly at them from one side. Like the two boys who had let them in, they were dressed in military uniforms that they’d obviously ‘borrowed’ from an exhibit, and they were heavily armed.

‘Who is it?’ came a voice from behind one of the tanks.

‘Dunno, some kids,’ said one of the boys in uniform.

Brooke walked round the tank, followed by the rest of the coach party.

Three boys of about thirteen were sitting cross-legged on the floor, wrapped in blankets and duvets. They looked like village elders around a campfire. All three of them were equipped with rulers, dice and notebooks, and spread out around them on the gleaming tiles

were hundreds of miniature metal soldiers and an odd assortment of bits and pieces that were being used to represent landscape – trees and buildings and roads. They were evidently in the middle of an elaborate war game.

One was a chubby kid wearing a First World War German helmet, with a spike in the top. Next to him sat a black kid wearing plastic-framed glasses held together at the nose with Elastoplast. He stared, unblinking, at the intruders. The glasses made his eyes look massive, as if they could look right through you. He had a serious expression, verging on blank, and there was a stillness about him. The third boy couldn't have been more different. He was pale, wiry, fidgety, animated, like a pot on the boil. He scratched his armpit, picked his nose and grinned like a monkey at the new arrivals.

'Fresh meat,' he said. 'Yum yum! Groovalicious.'

'Ha, ha,' said Brooke with all her usual sarcasm. 'Very funny.'

'I like to think so,' said the skinny boy. 'I like to think I ain't lost it.'

'I doubt you ever had it,' said Brooke.

The skinny boy jumped up and offered his palm to Brooke. She refused to slap it.

'I'm DogNut,' he said. 'But you can call me "babe".'

Brooke shook her head and moved away from him.

'Watch where you're walking,' said the black kid in the glasses.

'Ooh, we don't want to mess up your toys, do we?' said Brooke.

'No,' said the boy matter-of-factly, but combined with his cold hard stare it came across as strangely menacing. Brooke faltered, unsure whether to push it any further. There was something about the boy that told her to be careful, an air of authority and quiet power.

'Listen to what the bad man says,' said DogNut. 'Believe me, you don't never want to get on the bad side of Jordan Hordern.'

'That your name?' said Brooke. 'Jordan Hordern.'

'Yes,' said the black kid. 'What of it?'

'Nothing. Is a good name. Rhymes.'

'Yes,' said Jordan Hordern. 'I know.'

'Will you be staying for tea?' asked DogNut in a mock posh voice.

'They're not staying,' said Jordan Hordern, turning away from them and concentrating on his game.

'Who says?' Brooke asked.

'If the man says you ain't staying,' said DogNut, 'you ain't staying. Like, soz and all, but no one argues with Jordan Hordern, get me?'

'Hang on a minute,' said Jack, pushing past Ed. 'You don't own this place. You can't just kick us out.'

'Can't I?'

'No way,' said Brooke. 'We just excaped from bare sickos out

there, man. First we was trapped on a bus with a father who went psycho on us and tried to batter us all, and then there was these, like, freaks in the street and –'

'What were you doing with a father on a bus?' Jordan Hordern interrupted.

'Well, durr, he was, like, *driving*, wasn't he?'

'Don't you know they're all mental?'

'We know that now, but he looked OK, he saved me and my girlfriends and he swore down he wasn't gonna go sick on us.'

'And you trusted him? You're more stupid than you look.'

'Yeah? And you're a prick,' said Brooke.

Jordan Hordern looked at her curiously and then shrugged. 'You still ain't staying.'

'Why'd you let us in in the first place, then?' Ed asked.

'Good question.' Jordan Hordern turned his gaze on to the two guards who had opened the doors. 'Why *did* you let them in?' he asked. 'You know the rules.'

The boys looked at their feet, not sure what to say.

'They let us in because they wanted to help us!' said Jack angrily. 'Because we're kids like you. Human beings. Assuming you *are* human and not some kind of macho robot arsehole.'

Jordan Hordern's expression didn't change.

'Come on,' said Brooke. 'You can't kick us out. We wouldn't last five minutes out there. We'll be merked.'

'Not our problem.'

'Well, what *is* your problem?' said Jack.

'It's very simple. And it's nothing personal,' said Jordan Hordern. 'We got enough food and water here for ten people to live an OK life. We got security and heat, and we're well defended. Any more than ten of us, though, becomes a problem. That clear enough for you?'

'And how long is your food gonna last?' Jack asked.

'It'll get us through the winter if we're careful. With any luck, when it warms up, all the adults will have died off and we can go out and get more.'

'We only being reasonable,' said DogNut. 'We looking after number one. That's how it works now, blood.'

'Have you turned other people away?' Bam asked. He was bruised from his fight on the bus, and had a gash in one cheek, as well as a nasty wound in his left hand where Greg had bitten him.

'A few,' said Jordan Hordern.

'Well, you're not throwing us out.' Bam sat down in the middle of their game, crushing a battalion of German soldiers.

'Oh, don't do that,' DogNut moaned. 'I was winning for once.'

'We're not leaving,' said Bam. 'You can try and make us, but we're

staying put.'

Jordan Hordern stared dispassionately at Bam for a few seconds then clapped his hands together. Five more of his boys came over. They were carrying swords and truncheons.

'Come off it,' Jack scoffed. 'It's one thing hiding in here and not opening the doors to a few stray kids, it's another thing to actually kill them. Is that what you think you're gonna do? Kill all twenty-five of us? Or maybe you were thinking you might just beat us up and throw our bleeding, semi-conscious bodies out of a window.'

'Wait up,' Brooke interrupted, jutting her jaw out at Jordan Hordern. 'You said there's ten of you, yeah?'

'Yes.'

'Are you all boys, then?'

'What of it?'

Brooke laughed. 'Then we got something you need,' she said, eyeing Jordan defiantly.

'What?'

Brooke made a display of herself, arms out to her sides, and said, 'Ta-daa!'

'Broo-ooke!' Aleisha rolled her eyes, scandalized.

'I don't mean like that,' said Brooke. 'You got a dirty mind, Aleisha. I just mean we got skills that might come in useful.'

'Yeah, I can think of a few,' DogNut sniggered.

'In your dreams,' Brooke sneered.

'You already are,' said DogNut.

'We don't need girls,' said Jordan Hordern.

'Whoa-whoa-whoa, wait a minute,' said DogNut, dancing on the spot and dropping his blanket. Underneath it he was wearing a brown leather American flying jacket, a screaming eagle painted on its back. 'Let's not be too hasty here. She does have a point, Jordan.'

'No, she doesn't. We're not taking in any more. Now get them out of here so we can finish our game.'

Jack exploded with rage. He barged his way over to Jordan and leant over him, jabbing a finger in his face.

'You're worse than the bloody grown-ups. You know that? At least they don't know what they're doing. You're just cold. We've got little kids with us – eight, nine years old – you gonna smash their brains out, are you? You gonna cut us all up? Well, you can bloody try. We've climbed a mountain of crap in the last two days and we're not gonna go down without a fight. We're not asking to come and live with you forever in your precious bloody museum. We just need shelter until we can get ourselves sorted.'

'Don't point at me,' said Jordan. 'I don't like people pointing at me.'

‘Oh, don’t you? So why don’t you get one of your little soldier boys to hack my finger off? Cos I don’t think you’ve got the balls to do it yourself, have you?’

At that, Jordan threw off his blankets and stood up. He was wearing a smart black officer’s uniform, complete with gold braid and medals. He was taller than Jack and moved like an athlete. Before Jack could react Jordan had grabbed his wrist and was twisting it to the side.

Jack winced, evidently in a lot of pain. Jordan kept on turning his wrist, forcing Jack to the ground. Jack tried to pull away but Jordan held him with an iron grip. Once Jack was on his knees Jordan spoke, his voice low and quiet.

‘I don’t care what you say to me, I don’t care what you think about me, but don’t ever point at me again. All right?’

‘All right, all right, you can stop now. I’ve got the general idea.’

Jordan squeezed harder. Jack yelped.

Now Ed spoke out. ‘I think this has got a bit out of hand,’ he said. ‘We should all calm down and talk about it.’

Jordan looked round at Ed without letting go of Jack.

Ed went on. ‘Jack’s right. All we need is somewhere to stay until we’ve worked out what we’re going to do. Maybe only for one night. Maybe not even that. OK? You don’t need to give us any food if you don’t want. We’re not trying to take over or anything. We all just ran in here after a fight to get away. There’s still sickos out there.’

Jack gasped. He was kneeling on the tiles, his lips pulled back in a grimace of pain.

‘Can we at least just talk about this sensibly?’ Ed pleaded.

Jordan let go of Jack, who rolled away and sat down against a tank, rubbing his arm.

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Jordan. ‘We’ll finish our game, then we’ll talk. You can have some water, but no food. Sort yourselves out and I’ll listen to what you’ve got to say. I’m only going to talk to one of you, though. Who’s in charge?’

‘Nobody,’ said Ed.

‘Then I’m appointing you.’ Jordan turned back to his game and started straightening the troops that had got knocked over.

30

‘Let’s get this out in the open.’ Ed banged his hands on a tabletop. ‘And then I don’t want to hear any more about it. Not from you, Bam, not from Jack, not from anyone.’ Ed looked around, daring the other kids to catch his eye.

They were all in the museum café, off to the side of the atrium, spread out among the tables. The place had been ransacked and no one at the museum had bothered to tidy up; there was litter everywhere.

The Brains Trust was sitting shivering at one table – Justin the nerd, Jibber-jabber, Wiki, Zohra and Froggie. Mad Matt was with Archie Bishop and the other kids from the chapel. There was an ugly black and red scab across Matt’s forehead where Greg’s ring had raked his skin. Brooke, Courtney and Aleisha sat in one corner, in a cloud of perfume and attitude. Chris Marker was by himself. He had inevitably gone back to reading his book, but the others viewed him differently after what he’d done to Greg on the bus. He wasn’t totally useless. Jack, Ed and Frédérique were at another table with Bam. Bam was the only one of the rugby players still alive, and he’d obviously been hit hard by Piers’ death. This was the first time anyone had seen him down and lacking his cheery optimism. Kwanele sat by himself, straight-backed and defiant.

While they’d been waiting in here Bam had been on at Ed and Kwanele non-stop about leaving Piers behind, and Ed had had enough.

‘Have any of you ever tried to carry someone who was unconscious?’ he asked. ‘People are heavy. Piers was heavy. Greg came after us and Piers’ body got caught on something. If I’d stayed any longer, Greg would have got me, and then the other sickos outside

would have made it on to the bus and that would have been that. And why? Because you lot had all scarpered and left me to it. Thanks.'

Kwanele obviously thought Ed was referring to him.

'Piers was badly wounded,' he protested. 'He probably would not have lived anyway, not without proper medicine, and doctors and things like that.'

'So that's it, is it?' said Bam. 'Like DogNut or whatever his name is out there said, look out for number one. If you're hurt, forget it.'

'It wasn't just Kwanele,' Ed shouted. 'You all left me behind.'

'We were fighting off sickos,' said Bam. 'I was trying to get everyone to safety.'

'Exactly,' said Ed. 'We've all got excuses.'

There was a long silence before Bam spoke.

'All right,' he said. 'Maybe we were all to blame. It happened too fast.'

'It's basic survival now,' said Ed. 'Getting from one day to another. This place is well defended, standing alone, with open ground all around, and it's stuffed full of weapons. It would be a perfect place to set up camp. But someone else got here first and we can't expect them to look after us.'

'I don't want to stay here anyway,' said Jack. 'I want to get home.'

'Then why the hell were you arguing so much with Jordan bloody Hordern?'

'He wound me up,' said Jack. 'I don't like anyone talking to me like that.'

'I don't want to stay here, either,' said Matt. 'I need to carry on to St Paul's. It's been ordained that –'

'Give it a rest, Matt,' said Ed. 'We're fed up of hearing about your bloody made-up religion.'

'It's not made up.'

'Yes it is. Nothing has *been ordained*. It's all come out of your head.'

'And what about this, then?' said Matt, angrily tapping his forehead.

'What about what?'

'The mark of the Lamb.'

'It's a scab, Matt.'

'It's the mark of the Lamb.'

Ed laughed harshly, using his laughter like a weapon.

'It doesn't matter whether you believe us, anyway,' said Archie Bishop. 'We want to carry on to St Paul's. With or without you lot – it doesn't make any difference.'

'Doesn't make any difference?' Ed scoffed. 'You'll be murdered out there by yourselves.'

‘The Lamb will protect us.’

There were groans from the other tables and people started throwing things at Matt. Old discarded coffee cups, screwed-up paper, empty cigarette packets.

Matt tried not to react, as if he was above it all, but they could tell he was getting riled.

‘What does anyone else want to do?’ Ed asked when things had calmed down a little.

‘We want to stay with you,’ said Wiki. ‘We’ll go wherever you say you want to go. If we keep together, it’ll be safer. Like when fish form into shoals. Even though they’re a bigger target, individually they’re safer, and harder for predators to focus on. The chances of being picked out from a big swirling mass are less than if they’re swimming alone.’

‘Thank you, David Attenborough,’ said Jack, trying to cut him off.

‘We could find another building to shelter in,’ said Jibber-jabber. ‘There’s loads of places near the museum, I came here once with my dad, we had to park miles away and walk, there’s all sorts of houses, I bet if we explored we could find something great, we don’t need to stay here, I don’t like Jordan Hordern or any of them, actually, although I liked the look of that game they were playing, I like toy soldiers, at home I’ve got hundreds, and now we’ve got our own gun and maybe they’ll let us have some weapons from the museum, we could be like a commando squad, you’re good fighters and –’

‘Not all of us,’ said Bam darkly, looking at Kwanele.

‘I never said I was a fighter,’ Kwanele protested.

‘I thought we weren’t going to go on about that.’ Ed sounded tired and fed up.

‘Sorry.’ Bam bowed his head.

Frédérique suddenly let out a sob and collapsed face down on the tabletop, crying. Jack and Ed both put a hand on her, trying to comfort her. She was tugging at her hair, hysterical.

‘What’s the matter with *her*?’ said Brooke snottily, and Aleisha jabbed her with an elbow.

‘What?’ said Brooke. ‘I only asked what was the matter.’

‘What do you think?’ said Ed. ‘If we weren’t all trying so hard to act tough, we’d all be face down on the table crying like babies. Because that’s all we are. Just babies. This is all too much for any of us to handle.’

‘I ain’t crying,’ said Brooke. ‘I ain’t giving up.’

Jack clapped sarcastically. ‘Well done, you.’

‘It’s stupid,’ said Frédérique. ‘We are all going to die. What’s the point of all this talking? Why must we argue?’ She raised her head. Her face was blotchy and streaked with tears. ‘Why do we need to find

somewhere safe? Why do we need to do anything? We are all going to die. I thought there was some hope. Greg was not ill. I thought if just one adult was not ill there was hope for us. But he is ill, and there is no hope …'

Frédérique was crying so much she started to choke, and she crumpled down again, weeping, choking, coughing and spluttering.

'Cheery soul, ain't she?' said Brooke, and Aleisha elbowed her again.

The big glass door opened and DogNut came in.

'OK, listen up,' he said, clapping his hands together. 'Jordan Hordern's made a decision.' He pointed at Ed. 'You, wossyourname …'

'Ed.'

'OK, Ed my man, you go and talk to the general. He's waiting for you. Chop-chop. The rest of you, chillax.'

31

Ed and Jordan Hordern were sitting side by side in the front seats of a Second World War Jeep, looking out across the atrium. It was cold and the thin winter light that made its way through the massive arched glass ceiling did little to lift the gloom. Jordan had given Ed a furry blanket that he'd wrapped tightly about his body.

'You mustn't take any of this personally,' Jordan was saying, staring straight ahead without looking at Ed.

'I don't,' Ed replied. 'I know where you're coming from.'

'Good. I don't hate any of you. But I have to look after my people.'

'It's cool. So you're booting us out?'

'Not necessarily. Like I said, we don't have enough food here to support any more people. But there's a simple answer. I'll let you take any weapons you want. There's way too many for us to use. And I'll let you stay here …'

'Thanks.'

'I ain't finished.'

'Oh. Right.'

'As I was saying. You can sleep here tonight. No conditions. I'll put you in the 1940s house.'

'What's that?'

'Special exhibit, complete wartime house with all the stuff in it. Beds and everything. I figure the little kids you got with you will feel more at home in there. Less freaked out.'

'Thanks.'

'Then, after that, you can stay here as long as you want, so long as you can feed yourselves.'

'What do you mean?'

‘What I say. Don’t worry about water, there’s plenty in the tanks here, but if you want to eat you gonna have to go out and find it.’

‘That sounds fair, I guess,’ said Ed. ‘I’ll see what the others think about it. Can you let us have any food to keep us going?’

‘Nope. I’ve given you my offer. I won’t change it. They’re pretty good guys, the guys here. You stick with us, we’ll be strong. But you got to swing your weight.’

Ed was thinking through how this arrangement might work. ‘Do you think there’s food out there?’ he asked.

‘Don’t see why not,’ said Jordan. ‘Take it from me, though, you won’t find nothing fresh: no bread, no eggs, no milk, no fresh vegetables and fruit, nothing like that.’

‘Have you got any of that stuff?’

‘Nope. We got cans and packets of dry stuff. It ain’t exactly healthy but it keeps us alive.’

‘Where’d you get it all from?’

‘We wasn’t the only ones who had the idea to hole up in here. Some guys was here first. Men. Real nasty. They was tooled up, and must have brought a load of kit in with them, boxes and cans and whatever. I think maybe they’d robbed a supermarket or something. They killed off the guards looking after the place and was settled in for a siege, but like everybody else they found out real quick that the enemy was inside, not outside. The sickness. Already eating away at them.’ Jordan paused, ran his fingers round the rim of the steering wheel.

‘What happened to them?’ Ed asked.

‘Tore each other to pieces. The ones who was slower to get sick whacking the ones who got sick first. When we turned up, there was only five of them left. We got rid of them, but they took out a bunch of us. It was pretty heavy duty. Which is why we figure we earned the right to what’s here.’

‘So there were more of you to start with?’

‘Twenty-two. Five died in the attack. One died after of an infected wound. Two more got sick later on – turned out they was older than we knew – broke out in spots; we ejected them quick. Then four more left to try their luck elsewhere.’

‘What were you, all at the same school?’

‘We’re a mix. Family, friends, school, we all just sort of come together out on the streets, moving from place to place until we washed up here about five weeks ago.’

‘OK.’ Ed sighed and got out of the Jeep. His muscles felt stiff and sore from being tensed for so long. ‘I can see why you want to look after what you’ve got,’ he said. ‘I’ll go talk to the others. You sure you can’t give us any food, though? They’re all pretty hungry.’

‘You want to eat, you got to go shopping.’

Ed was overcome with tiredness. Everything seemed such a struggle. He rubbed his face with his hands. ‘I just don’t know where to start,’ he said.

‘Can I make a suggestion?’

‘Sure.’

‘What was you eating before you got here?’

‘There was stuff on the bus.’

‘What I thought.’

Ed looked at Jordan Hordern. His glasses were glinting in the half-light.

‘So what’s your suggestion?’ he asked.

‘Go back to the bus,’ said Jordan. ‘See if there’s any of it left.’

Ed nodded. ‘Sounds like a good plan.’

‘But first,’ said Jordan, ‘you need to get yourselves some serious weapons.’

32

The main exhibition gallery of the museum was on the next floor down, underground. Ed remembered coming here with the school. It was a big, dimly lit, windowless area filled with display cases and divided into various sections. There were exhibits covering the two world wars, and another covering conflicts since 1945. There were also a couple of special sections like the Blitz Experience. The rows of glass cases were filled with dummies in uniform and hundreds of guns, grenades, knives, small artillery pieces, maps, banners, personal items and equipment.

Six boys were coming down the stairs, their torch beams showing the way. Jack, Ed, Bam and Jordan were at the front followed by Matt and Archie Bishop. Ed's torch wasn't working properly; the beam kept cutting out. He rattled it, then banged it against his palm and swore.

'Not scared of the dark, are you?' Jordan asked.

'Not the dark,' said Ed. 'Only what hides in it.'

As he said it, Ed's torch came back on. It landed on a face and he jumped. The others laughed.

'Only a dummy,' said Bam.

Ed didn't like it down here. Everywhere he turned there was another dummy. He was surrounded by perfect, clean-faced young men, frozen to attention, or holding their guns ready for action. They looked very different from the men who now roamed London's streets with their bloated faces and ruined flesh, but they still gave him the creeps.

His heart was thumping. He felt like a silly little kid. Frightened of ghosts. But he couldn't shrug the feeling off. He'd been strung out for so long, scared for so long, not sleeping, not eating properly, it was no

wonder he was on edge.

And what if there were sickos down here? What if one had got in and was hiding in the dark? Waiting to jump him? What if …?

He told himself not to be an idiot, but stayed close to the others all the same.

'Most of this stuff's no use to you,' said Jordan. 'Mostly guns without ammo, and you'd need a manual to work out how to use them. There's some gear through this way you might like, though.'

He led them into the First World War section and shone his torch into a trench warfare cabinet whose glass had been kicked in.

'I'd suggest you take a rifle or two,' he said. 'No bullets for these, but they got straps to carry over your shoulder, and if you stick them bayonets on the end you can use them like spears. I recommend the British Lee-Enfield. It's a good solid gun.'

Ed reached in and took a rifle from the display, then found a bayonet that fitted it.

'There's a load more weapons in the armoury downstairs,' Jordan explained. 'And ammo too, but I'm keeping the best stuff for my boys, you understand.'

'We understand,' said Jack wearily. 'You're keeping the best stuff.'

Jack hadn't quite forgiven Jordan, but he had to admit that these weapons would be very handy.

'These are useful too,' said Jordan, swinging his torch beam over to the case opposite that held a selection of weapons for close-up, hand-to-hand fighting in the trenches. Clubs, knives, knuckledusters, knuckleduster knives …

Ed and Bam tried some of them. Bam picked out a sturdy wooden club that was studded with bits of metal and nails. It looked completely evil and Bam grinned, taking a few practice swings. Finally he turned to one of the dummies and caved its face in with one blow.

'This should do the trick,' he said. 'Very nice.'

Matt and Archie were pressed up against one of the other cases, deep in conversation.

'What are you after?' Bam asked them. 'A Holy Hand Grenade?'

'A what?' Archie and Matt looked confused.

'It's in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.'

'Monty Python?'

'You must have heard of Monty Python,' said Bam, as if he was talking to a couple of idiots. 'They were like this old comedy team? They made films and everything.'

'No.'

'Well … I don't suppose you ever will see any of that now. But they were very funny.'

'Right.'

‘So what *are* you looking for, then?’

‘We need a banner,’ said Archie Bishop seriously. ‘There’s a lot in the texts about banners.’

‘We will be the army of the Lamb,’ said Matt. ‘Modern crusaders marching under a banner. The pages have shown us that we are fighting a new war – we are soldiers of the Lamb.’

‘Yeah.’ Bam wasn’t really listening. He was distracted by the scab on Matt’s forehead. It was going a bit yellow and gungy round the edges and looked really horrible.

‘Did you properly clean that?’ he said, nodding towards it.

‘No. It’s the mark of the Lamb. The Lamb will heal me.’

‘It looks infected. You need to be careful.’

Matt shook his head. ‘I don’t need to worry about anything. I am being carried by the Lamb. His arms are around me.’

Matt walked on in search of a suitable banner, and Bam held Archie back.

‘Listen, mate,’ he said quietly. ‘If you’re really serious about heading off to St Paul’s, just be a bit careful, yeah? You go wandering around out there singing hymns and waving flags, you’ll attract every sicko in London.’

‘Banners not flags.’

‘Same difference,’ said Bam.

‘We’ll be all right,’ said Archie.

‘You reckon?’ Bam asked, his face creased with a frown. ‘You really believe that the Lamb’s going to protect you and all that?’

Archie shrugged. ‘I might as well believe in the Lamb as anything else, Bam. None of the old gods really helped anyone much, did they? My dad was a vicar; he got sick along with all the rest. Nothing we put our trust in before stood up to much. It’s reassuring, you know, Matt being so, well, so *sure* of stuff. If I stick with him, I don’t have to worry about anything else.’

‘Fair enough.’ Bam smiled.

‘Think about it, Bam,’ Archie went on. ‘You’re going to have to do something sooner or later. We’re all going to have to try and work out how we’re going to survive.’ Archie looked around the museum. ‘This is all right, I suppose, but it’s not real life. You’ve got to have a plan, or you’ll go crazy.’

‘Good point.’

‘I mean, how long are you planning to stay here?’

‘I’m trying not to think more than about twenty seconds ahead, Archie. Never have. It’s got me this far all right.’

Jack had wandered away from the others, unsatisfied. He didn’t know what he was looking for but he hadn’t seen it yet. The knife he’d picked out wasn’t enough. He wanted something that when he held it

in his hand he'd feel invincible. Feel its strength and power flowing into him.

He wished there were bullets for the various pistols on display; a handgun would have been perfect. He wondered whether he could persuade Jordan to let him see what was in the armoury. But thought probably not. He'd got off to a bad start with Jordan. Misjudged him. The guy was hard and cold, but at least he was reasonable. Nothing he did was because of any twisted emotions. In a way Jack respected him. But he didn't want to push his luck.

He wandered past the displays, impressed and appalled at man's ingenuity, the endless ways he'd found to kill other people. He stopped and reached into a broken cabinet to pick out a Russian Second World War helmet. It fitted perfectly and he kept it on.

'Come on, Jack. We're going.' Ed's voice. 'You got what you need?'

'Yeah, nearly,' Jack replied. 'I'm coming.'

Jack headed back towards the entrance, flicking his beam from side to side, angry at himself for not choosing something, and then a flash of bright sky blue caught his eye. It was a uniform. He went over for a closer look. It was in a cabinet of outfits from another era, a time before camouflage and khaki and dull olive-green. They looked so old-fashioned they might have been worn at the battle of Waterloo, but they were from just before the First World War, when soldiers still wore brightly coloured uniforms to stand out on the battlefield and impress the enemy. They were Officers' uniforms, covered in braid and gold buttons and fancy details.

And there, neatly displayed, a sturdy-looking naval officer's sword. It looked to be a good length and was probably well made. Jack smashed the glass with the handle of his knife. The noise sounded like an explosion going off in the silent gloom of the gallery.

'What was that?' Ed's voice again. He was probably bricking it.

'It's all right. It's only me. I found something.'

Jack lifted out the sword. It was clean and gleaming, the edge still sharp. The curators at the museum had obviously looked after everything very well. He smiled. The blade was perfectly balanced in his hand, a good weight. He sliced a long curve through the air.

Perfect.

'Jack?'

He took the scabbard and belt from the dummy torso they were fixed to and fastened them round his waist. It was a good fit. The scabbard hung well.

'You coming, Jack?'

'Yeah. I'm ready.'

33

It was perhaps a five-year-old child's idea of a feast, but it was a feast all the same. Crisps and biscuits and Coke. Perhaps a five-year-old would have turned up his nose at the cans of cold sausages and beans, but to the hungry kids in the museum it was the best food they'd ever tasted.

Jack, Ed and Bam had done a mad dash to the coach and grabbed as much food as they could carry before Ed spotted a group of sickos approaching along the road. They'd made it back without having to use any of their new weapons and were welcomed as returning heroes. The only bad moment had been when they'd spotted what they'd thought was a discarded pair of dirty trousers in the road. Ed had gone over to check them out and realized there were legs inside, with black shoes on the feet. And at the waist was a ragged tangle of guts and a stub of white spine.

It was all that was left of Piers.

They'd thought about rationing the food and trying to make it last a couple of days, but in the end they decided what the hell, they might as well scoff the lot and have a proper look for some decent food in the morning.

The Brains Trust and the girls had made an effort to tidy up the café and make it feel a little more welcoming. The tables had been wiped, the rubbish collected and they'd put candles about the place that helped to give the impression that the room was warmer than it was. Even Frédérique had perked up and joined in. It had helped her having something to do. Stopped her from sitting by herself and staring into space. She'd bustled about and chatted to the other girls and now she was sitting at a table with Jack, Ed, Bam and Brooke, and

was even laughing as Brooke told a funny story about eating too much chocolate at Courtney's tenth birthday party.

'I puked me guts up!' she boasted. 'It was like a fire extinguisher going off. Kersploosh! It went everywhere. All over the cake, all over Courtney, all over Courtney's mum, all over her presents … Sorry if I'm putting you off your dinner, Fred.'

Frédérique couldn't stop laughing. It was a slightly hysterical, out-of-control laugh that was just a little unnerving. She'd taken a gulp of water and the puking part of the story had taken her by surprise. She was now mainly laughing at the fact that she was laughing, and choking and dribbling and about to spit water everywhere. Somehow she managed to swallow it, but that caused her to start coughing and spluttering, which made the others laugh, which made her laugh …

It hadn't been lost on Ed that Brooke wasn't sitting with her two girlfriends, who were at a table with the Brains Trust, enjoying playing mother for a bit with the younger kids.

Brooke had made a point of sitting right next to him, and she kept directing her conversation at him, and touching his arm and making eye contact. He found it quite flattering, but, to be honest, Brooke scared him. She was so loud and confident and unforgiving. She was one of those girls who used her friendship like a weapon, giving it and taking it away to reward or punish people.

He was just glad she was on his side for the time being. Maybe since Jordan Hordern had put him in charge she wanted to make sure she was at the top table.

Jack was making an effort with Frédérique. Trying to keep her spirits up and not let her slip back into her dark mood. But he reckoned he was fighting a losing battle. She seemed exhausted after her laughing fit, and the more Brooke talked about the past the quieter Frédérique became. Slowly the haunted look came back into her eyes and she retreated into herself.

'Hey,' he said when he noticed that she was crying again. 'It's going to be all right.'

'No,' she said. 'Tomorrow there will be no more food and you will go and I don't know what I will do.'

'I'm not going to abandon anyone,' said Jack, and he caught Ed looking at him. 'OK? I'm not just going to leave you. Tomorrow morning, we'll go out and we'll find some food and, when I'm sure you're all going to be fine, I'll go home. But not before.'

'OK.' Frédérique nodded.

'There's nothing to be frightened of any more. Greg's gone. We've got good weapons. The sickos don't stand a chance, eh?'

Jack immediately wished he hadn't bothered. As soon as he said the word 'sickos', Frédérique let out a huge sob and the floodgates

opened. The crying set her off coughing again. Jack whacked her on her back.

'Don't talk about them,' she said.

'I'm sorry, Fred. I didn't mean to scare you.'

'Greg is one of them now.'

'Yeah, I guess, or else he's dead. Good riddance, I say. He was an arsehole.'

'But he said he would not get sick.'

'Yeah, well, he could have said he could fly – we didn't have to believe him, did we? He thought he could cheat nature. He couldn't. Basically, if you're over fourteen, forget it.'

Before Frédérique could say anything else Justin the nerd came over to their table, looking embarrassed and secretive. He tucked in behind Jack's chair and leant over to speak quietly into his ear.

'Can I talk to you?' he said.

'Yeah, of course, Just'. What's up?'

'Did you bring Greg's cool box back from the bus?'

'The cooler? Yeah. Why? You want something from it?'

'No. Have you … Have you eaten anything out of it?'

'Nope.' Jack shook his head. 'We thought we'd save it for breakfast. As a kind of treat. There's proper food in there.'

'Only … Don't eat the smoked meat.'

'Why not?'

Justin shuffled about nervously. 'We've been talking …' He glanced back at his table where the Brains Trust was watching him. 'About something Liam said before he, you know, died … About the meat.'

'Is there something wrong with it?'

Justin looked at the other kids sitting around the table, not sure how to say the next bit. Not sure if he should.

'Can we talk in, you know, private?'

'Yeah, sure.'

Justin and Jack went over to the food counter where nobody could hear them. The kids in the Brains Trust were still staring at them.

'Why all the mystery, Just'?'

'I don't want to, you know, upset anyone,' said Justin. 'That French girl seems pretty freaked out by all this. I wasn't sure …'

Jack laughed. 'You're not really a nerd, are you, Justin?'

Justin looked surprised. 'What do you mean?'

'A real nerd wouldn't care about hurting anyone's feelings.'

'Oh, well …' Justin blushed and Jack laughed again.

'So, come on, then, Mr Sensitive, tell me – what's wrong with the meat?'

‘We think it’s human meat.’

‘You what?’

‘We think Greg butchered a boy down on that farm in Kent he was always going on about. We think that’s what he was eating.’

‘Jesus Christ.’ Jack looked appalled. ‘So he was already sick?’

‘In a way, maybe. Or maybe he was just trying to survive. He said the livestock on the farm got ill, so he … you know …’

Jack sighed and rubbed his eyes. Half of him wanted to laugh. The other half wanted to throw up.

‘Thanks for letting us know,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll chuck it out. Thank God we didn’t eat any of it. And you were right, mate. Let’s not tell anyone else about this. We’ll stick to our sausages and beans.’

‘Mind you,’ said Justin. ‘The crap they put in those tinned sausages, you never know what you’re eating. For all we know they’ve been putting human meat in them for years.’

‘You *are* still a *bit* of a nerd, aren’t you, Justin?’

34

The 1940s house was a full-size replica of a mock-Tudor suburban house complete with green-painted front door, sloping tiled roof, Union Jack and empty milk bottles on the doorstep. It was set up in a corner of the exhibition space to show children what life had been like during wartime when the German bombs had rained down on London. There was a little kitchen, a dining room, a living room and a couple of bedrooms, all equipped and furnished as they would have been during the Second World War. There were already a few beds in here but Jordan Hordern's boys had dragged in some extra mattresses and sleeping bags and had lent the kids a small paraffin heater so that it was cosy and warm. They'd lit tea lights in glass jars that gave a twinkling glow to the place and for a while all the problems of the outside world were forgotten. The kids felt safe and excited at the same time, as if they were having a giant sleepover.

There was even a Morrison shelter in one room, like a big steel cage. During the Blitz families would have slept in one of these; now it was the perfect place for Frédérique's cat, Dior, to come out of her box and spend the night.

Lying nearby on his mattress on the floor, Ed could hear her scrabbling about. He couldn't get to sleep. It wasn't just the noise of the cat and the grunts and snores and gurgling bellies of the other kids. He couldn't stop his mind from going over and over the events of the last two days.

He felt like he had failed. He could have done more. Sure, they were safe here for now, but how many friends had he lost along the way?

'You not asleep?'

It was Jack's voice. He was lying on a mattress on top of the Morrison shelter.

'No,' Ed whispered. 'You either?'

'No. Been looking at this poster on the wall. Wartime advice from the government. "*Make Do and Mend. Save Fuel for Battle. Save Kitchen Scraps to Feed the Pigs. Don't Waste Water. Dig for Victory. Holiday at Home. Eat Greens for Health. Keep Calm and Carry On.*"'

'Very good advice,' said Ed. 'Especially now.'

'Is that where *Keep Calm and Carry On* comes from, then?' Jack asked quietly.

'I guess so. It was a wartime thing. The Blitz. Bombs falling all about.'

'There was a real craze for that slogan recently, wasn't there?' said Jack. 'People had it on posters and mugs and things.'

'My mum gave me a T-shirt with it on last Christmas.' Ed smiled at the memory. 'Wish I still had it. All I had to get stressed about before was GCSEs.'

'She didn't give you a T-shirt that said *Save Kitchen Scraps to Feed the Pigs*, then?'

'No.' Ed smiled.

'Do you suppose in the war, in the Blitz, people thought it would go on forever?' Jack asked. 'That it was the end of the world?'

'You mean like now?' Ed shrugged. 'Probably a few did, but I bet most just wanted to try and carry on as if things were normal.'

'Keep calm and carry on,' said Jack.

'Exactly …'

'And holiday at home.'

Ed laughed. 'I prefer you when you're like this,' he said.

'How do you mean?' Jack shifted and propped himself up on one elbow.

'Well, you know. This is like the old days, how things used to be. Us two just having a laugh. I've noticed with you, when things are safe, you know, quiet, like now, you're cool, we get on all right, but as soon as we're out there, in any danger, you get all aggressive and you start having a go at everyone, not just me. It's like you turn, like you're two different people.'

'Oh right,' said Jack, his voice harder, wary. 'So I'm two-faced, am I?'

'Not exactly.'

'You mean like with my birthmark? I'm like a villain out of Batman, or something. Two-face?'

'I didn't say two-faced, Jack, did I? I just meant … Well, you're doing it now. One minute you're my best mate and the next you're having a go at me. I'm not used to it.'

Jack slumped back on to his mattress with a grunt and stared at the ceiling.

'I can't help it, Ed,' he said. 'You're right – it's when I get stressed I lash out. It's like I know I'm doing it, I don't want to do it, but I can't stop myself. I'm so knackered all the time and strung out. I could sleep for a year … But I can't get to sleep.'

'Let's try, though, eh?'

'Yeah, goodnight, Ed.'

'Goodnight, Jack.'

35

It was morning. The rain had stopped, the clouds torn away by a strong cold wind from the south. The sun was shining and the glistening, silvery streets were drying out.

There were two flowerbeds underneath the twin naval guns in front of the museum. Frédérique was kneeling down on the grass next to one of them with her cat box next to her.

There was a big wide-bladed army knife sticking up out of the flowerbed like a tool. Frédérique looked like she might have been gardening, trying to sort out the tangle of overgrown plants. Except she was very still. Kneeling there with her hands by her chin, almost as if she was praying.

'Frédérique?'

Jack had come out of the building and was coming down the steps. He was wearing his Russian helmet and his sword was dangling at his side. He walked between two yellow artillery shells embedded in the paving, like outsize bollards, scanning the area for any sign of sickos. Nothing moved anywhere. The park looked pretty in the sunlight. The drifts of rubbish that were stacked up everywhere might have been early spring flowers.

When he got to Frédérique, she didn't look up.

'What are you doing?'

'I cannot keep Dior locked up. It is not fair. She will have a better life by herself. I must let her go. My father would have done the same.'

'Are you sure?'

'She can find her own food, I think. Better than what I can give her. I have run out. The only problem is, she does not want to go.'

Jack squatted down and peered into the cage. Dior was flattened against the box at the far end, looking fearfully out, her eyes wide.

'You should hurry,' he said, straightening up. 'The sickos can't easily get into the park but if they spot us by ourselves they might just try.'

'You go in, Jack. I am all right.'

'I'm not gonna leave you out here by yourself, Fred.'

'Please …' Frédérique sniffed, coughed and put a wad of tissues to her nose. She was crying again. Jack sighed. He didn't know what to do or say to make things better.

'Come back inside,' he said. 'We'll find food for the cat.'

'Leave me.' She said it so forcefully, even angrily, that Jack backed away across the grass, leaving her alone with the cat.

He watched as she made little encouraging noises, cooing to the cat in French until at last it crept cautiously out, tiptoeing, and tensed. It looked around, making quick nervous movements with its head. Frédérique closed the cage and sat back on her heels. The cat made its way into the flowerbed. Frédérique coughed again and the cat darted away. In a moment it had disappeared. Frédérique stood up, head bowed, shoulders shaking. She dabbed her nose again with the tissues. Jack went to her and put his arm round her.

'Come on, it's cold out here. Admittedly it's not much warmer inside, but you don't want to get ill.'

Frédérique threw her arms round Jack and gave him a powerful hug. She had more strength in her than she looked. Jack hugged her back but he still didn't know what to say.

Bam and Ed had now come out of the museum and were looking at Jack locked in his embrace with Frédérique.

'Ah, young love!' said Bam.

'Touching, isn't it?' said Ed, and they laughed.

Jack broke away from Frédérique and came over to join them.

'This is what we need to take on the sickos,' he said as he passed the naval guns. 'Bloody big cannon.'

'We're not doing too badly with this lot.' Ed brandished his rifle, the bayonet stuck firmly on the end.

'We've got nothing to fear,' said Bam, slipping two shells into his shotgun.

'Maybe,' said Jack. 'But, still, I'd be happier if there were a few more of us.'

Even as he said it there was a commotion at the doors and Brooke came out, all in a fluster, carrying a long spiked club and whingeing back over her shoulder at someone behind her.

'Get off my case, loserface, I never said I liked Justin Timberlake …'

She stopped when she saw the others and skinny DogNut followed her out of the museum, his head bobbing up and down as if he was listening to loud music.

Jack frowned at her. 'What are you doing?'

'What's it look like? I'm helping. Didn't want you to have all the fun, did I?'

'This isn't a game, Brooke,' said Jack angrily.

'What? And you think I don't know that? We survived a long time on the road, me and my girls. Don't think we can't look after ourselves.'

'Yeah but …'

'Yeah but what? This is the twenty-first century, Jacko, or hadn't you noticed? Girls have got a lot more to offer than just knitting and cooking and having babies.'

'Making babies,' said DogNut with a smirk. 'Now you talking.'

Brooke spun round and slapped DogNut hard in the face. His head seemed to wobble like it was on a spring and he looked completely stunned.

Jack laughed.

'I've had just about enough of you, you tosser,' Brooke shouted. 'Keep your big mouth shut or I will shove it so far down your throat you'll be smiling out of your arse.'

'Yeah, OK …' DogNut mumbled, and Brooke turned her attention back to Jack.

'I'll admit I got freaked out on the bus, but I can handle it. You should have seen me whack Greg with that hammer thing. And now I got something better than a hammer.' She swung the club and Jack had to jump back to avoid being spiked.

'I figured if I'm not going to be scared I've got to stand up to them,' Brooke went on. 'This is how it is now and the quicker I get used to it the better.'

'What about him?' Jack nodded at DogNut, who still hadn't fully recovered from being hit.

'I can't shake him off. He's been tagging along behind me like a fart cloud all morning.'

'You come to wave us off, have you, Donut?' Jack asked.

'Not Donut, *DogNut*.'

'What kind of a name's DogNut?' Brooke asked with a withering look on her face.

'It's my gamer's tag. See, like the dog's nuts.'

'So why ain't you called Dognuts?'

'Yeah, or Dogsnuts?' said Bam.

'DogNut sounds better,' said DogNut.

'You reckon?' Brooke asked.

‘You still haven’t told me what you’re doing out here,’ said Jack.

‘I come to help, blood,’ said DogNut. ‘I’m pretty good in a mash-up, and I go mental being banged up in there. I need to get outside and feel the wind in my hair now and then, seen? So let’s bust some chops, eh? Hiyaa!’ He did a bad kung fu kick and Jack was forced to smile.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

‘I am coming with you.’ Frédérique was standing by one of the yellow shells, the big knife in her hand.

‘No,’ said Jack. ‘It’s all right, Fred …’

‘I want to.’

‘It’s dangerous.’

‘I don’t care. I will come with you. I am like Brooke. I do not want to be scared any more. I want to help find food. I want to be useful.’

‘All right,’ said Jack. ‘I did say we needed more bodies, though this wasn’t quite what I had in mind.’

‘Oh good, you ain’t left yet!’

More kids were coming out of the building. Big Courtney and little Aleisha, both carrying weapons that looked all wrong with their hair and their make-up and their bright clothing.

‘We was worried you’d gone without us,’ said Aleisha. ‘Courtney took so long to get ready you’d think she was going to a party or something, not on a sicko-whacking expedition.’

‘Oi, that ain’t fair!’ Courtney protested. ‘I couldn’t get near the mirror in the bathroom this morning, not with Brooke putting on her make-up. “*Oh what d’you think? D’you think Ed would like this colour of lipstick? Oh, do you think the spikes in this club go with these trousers?*”’

‘Shut it, Courtney!’ Brooke shrieked. ‘That is *so* not what happened.’

‘It *is* so, darling.’

‘So, where we going then, anyway?’ Brooke asked Ed, trying to change the subject. ‘Back to the bus?’

‘Maybe, if we don’t find anything else,’ said Ed. ‘We didn’t get it all last night, but we took the best of what there was. We need to find proper food really.’

‘Crisps *is* proper food where I come from!’ said Courtney, and they all laughed.

‘We should go down Kennington,’ said DogNut. ‘There’s a supermarket there, a big Tesco’s, near the gasholders.’ He pointed to the road that ran down the west side of the museum. ‘Worth a look.’

‘You sure we shouldn’t just search some of the houses round here?’ Ed asked.

‘I grew up in Kennington, blood,’ said DogNut. ‘I know it bare good. There’s way shops there, eating places too, you know, like,

restaurants and that, yeah? More than round here for sure.'

'And what if we see any sickos?' asked Courtney, who had armed herself with a sword that was a bit too long and unwieldy for her to use easily.

'Depends,' said Ed. 'It's best to run rather than fight.'

'We have to assume we *will* meet some of them,' said Jack. 'And we *will* have to fight. If anyone's got a problem with that, they should stay behind.'

Nobody said anything.

'Let's go then.'

'I must be crazy coming along with you,' Courtney said quietly to Brooke as they went across to the steps that led down into the stretch of park at the side of the museum.

'Sisters are doing it for themselves,' said Brooke, and she gave Courtney a high five. Aleisha joined in and then the three of them forced Frédérique to do one too. They giggled at her half-hearted effort.

'Get down, girl,' said Brooke. 'Don't be so snooty and, like, grown-up all the time. We're all kids in this together, yeah?'

'Yeah.' Frédérique tried again, this time really slapping Brooke hard.

'That's more like it, sister!'

Halfway to the edge of the park they heard a shout from behind and turned round to see Justin the nerd running towards them, awkwardly carrying a rifle and bayonet.

'Now what?' said Jack. 'Is he coming too?'

'Surely not,' said Ed.

Justin was out of breath when he caught up with them, red-faced from running.

'I'm going to help,' he said.

'You sure about this?' Ed asked.

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'We're not going on a picnic, Justin,' said Jack, sounding a little harsher than he had meant.

Justin looked nervous and angry at the same time. He took a deep breath and the words tumbled out of him. 'You said something to me yesterday, Jack. You said I wasn't a proper nerd.'

'I was mucking about, Just'.'

Justin was blushing now. 'I know what everyone thinks,' he said. 'That just because I'm clever, because I study hard and don't do sports, just because I like computers, and know how they work, because I like *Star Trek* and *Robot Wars* and have every *Doctor Who* DVD ever made, going right back to William Hartnell and including the rubbish one with Paul McGann, just because I've never had a girlfriend and don't

know what type of jeans I'm supposed to wear, you all dismiss me. You all think I'm a useless nerd.'

'We don't think that, Justin,' said Ed.

'Yes you do. I know you do. You call me Justin the nerd. Nerdy Justin. El Nerdo. That's all I am. Nothing more than a nerd, hardly human. But I *am* human, and, yes, I suppose I *am* a nerd, but I want to prove to you that I'm not a complete waste of space. I'll help you to find some more food. I'll fight if I have to. I've been picked on and bullied all my life so I've had to learn how to defend myself. I'm actually quite strong, if you want to know.' Justin stopped and glared at DogNut who had sniggered. DogNut looked embarrassed. He stopped sniggering and walked on.

'Are there any more of you coming out?' Jack asked, amused, staring back at the museum.

'Don't think so.'

'What about Chris Marker?'

'That geek! No way is he coming!'

36

At that moment Chris Marker was exploring the museum, carrying an old oil lamp. He had discovered a series of interconnected rooms hidden away down one side of the building that contained stack after stack of books, pamphlets, papers, letters and documents of all kinds relating to the history of warfare in the last century. It would take several lifetimes to read all the words they contained.

He wasn't frightened being alone here in the dark. Instead he felt a deep peace. He was reminded of TV ads for plug-in air fresheners where some woman would stick the little plastic thing in a socket and animated fumes would waft out and everyone would lift their faces, close their eyes, breathe in deeply and go 'Aaaaaah'. Like they were taking some kind of drug rather than inhaling chemicals. Well, the smell of all these old books and papers did that for Chris. He felt very calm.

This place was like a church for Chris, a cathedral. In the unlit gloom the great shelves of books could easily have been solid walls. Walls of information. A castle of words.

He was safe here. In the quiet, inside his wall of words, he could think clearly.

It was strange to be at peace in a library where most of the books were to do with war, but he would need to learn about war now. He picked a cardboard box at random from a shelf and opened it. Inside was a pile of old army manuals, with instructions on how to fire different rifles. Whole little booklets for each gun. He had had no idea that guns were so complicated. He supposed that's why they trained soldiers. All those guns downstairs in the exhibits and the armoury were useless without these manuals, little better than clubs or spears.

It was only by using the power of these books that they could come alive.

He'd need time. Time to pick out what was useful. He'd start to make piles of books and pamphlets. Maybe he'd move a bed in here, and live with the books. He'd only ever need to go out to eat, and use the toilet.

He was smiling at the thought. It was the first time he'd been alone since this whole nightmare had started. Properly alone. It was a delicious feeling.

No, not really alone, when he came to think about it, because he had the books for company, and to him they were like living, breathing things. The writers were there among the book stacks with him, like friendly spirits. Whenever he opened a book and read the words hidden inside it he was waking a ghost and the ghost would talk directly to him. The long-dead writer would come alive.

One of Jordan's boys had told him that this part of the museum was supposed to be haunted by a real ghost, the Grey Lady. He wasn't scared by the idea. He could imagine her, watching over him, watching over the precious books, the guardian of all the other ghosts they contained.

He was aware of a presence. Someone was there. He'd caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked along one of the book stacks. There was a woman there, dressed in grey. Crouched over, watching him. For some reason he still didn't feel scared.

'Hello,' he said, but the woman didn't respond.

He held up his lamp to get a better look. The woman's skin was as grey as her old-fashioned clothes, but she didn't look diseased, instead she looked beautiful, as if lit by an inner light. There was a half smile on her lips.

He walked towards her, and as the light from his lamp fell on her she disappeared. One moment she was there and then she seemed to dissolve into the books.

Chris had always seen ghosts. His mother had taken him to see a doctor who'd tried to explain that they weren't real.

What did doctors know?

Chris sat down on the floor.

He realized he was crying.

37

DogNut wouldn't shut up. Jack reckoned it was because he was nervous. Leaving the park had felt like stepping out of safety into danger. The road they were on, Kennington Road, was pretty wide and gave them a good view in both directions if they kept to the middle and so far it had been weirdly quiet. They hadn't seen anyone else but they all had a nervy prickly feeling as if they were being watched by unseen eyes. The others had tensed and gone silent, but not DogNut – he kept up a running commentary.

'Why's there never any zomboids around?' he was saying. 'Where do they all go in the daylight? Where's all the dead bodies?'

'Maybe they've all been eaten,' said Jack. His helmet already felt heavy on his head and the sword banged against his leg as he walked. 'They've got to eat something.'

'True that,' said DogNut. 'Except they prefer fresh meat. The living. *Us*. But, I mean, think about it, there was bare people in London before. Where'd they all go? It's too spooky.'

'You want to go back?' Jack asked.

'No way, soldier. I can't bust no moves stuck in that museum all day. Nice bundle will be a good way to get some exercise.' He waved his arms about and took a few practice swipes with the samurai sword he carried.

'Watch what you're doing with that thing,' said Jack.

'It's safe, man. Jordan makes us all do weapons practice. Drilling. But I'm telling you, blood, there's only so many war games you can play in a day. Don't try telling Jordan Hordern that, though. He's nuts about anything to do with war and the military. I reckon he thinks he's a real general.'

‘He seems pretty cold,’ said Jack.

‘That’s not the half of it, brother. He’s bonkers, I reckon. He never talks about his old life. Never talks about nothing normal. Just stares at you and yacks on about war and fighting. I reckon he’s some kind of an ick.’

‘A what?’

‘You know, like he’s autistic, or dyslexic, schizophrenic, alcoholic, something like that. Before all this he was just some sort of war-obsessed loony, now it’s his cold freaky brain that’s kept us all alive, which is why we do whatever he tells us to do. All hail the general!’

Bam was walking with Ed. He kept glancing up at the sky. Overhead it was still a clear pale blue, but ahead of them, to the south, it looked unnaturally dark.

He pointed it out to Ed.

‘Do you reckon it’s storm clouds?’

‘Dunno.’ Ed studied the blackening patch. ‘Can you see a kind of red glow along the bottom?’ he asked after a while. ‘Or am I imagining it?’

Bam squinted. ‘My eyesight’s not brilliant, to tell you the truth, mate. I should have had an eye test ages ago, but I was too scared.’

‘Scared?’ Ed shook his head, smiling. ‘You’re Bam the man. You’re not scared of anything.’

‘No word of a lie,’ said Bam. ‘I was a nervous wreck. I thought if I needed glasses I might not be able to play rugger any more. Wouldn’t be able to see the ball.’ He did a mime of someone fumbling to catch a ball, cross-eyed, hands going in all directions.

Ed laughed. ‘They make special sports contact lenses, don’t they?’ he said. Then checked himself. ‘Or at least they used to.’

‘I know, I know, but it’s not the same. Rugger’s a pretty brutal sport. I’d have been worrying all the time.’

‘Well, it’s too late to get your eyes tested now.’ Ed chuckled. ‘Let’s hope you don’t go blind.’

‘Can you imagine?’ said Bam. ‘Being blind and trying to cope with all this.’

‘Dunno,’ said Ed. ‘Some ways it might make it easier. You know, you wouldn’t have to look at their ugly pizza faces for a start.’

‘No,’ said Bam. ‘I don’t even want to think about it. That would be just too frightening. Urgh!’

Ed laughed, but his eyes were firmly fixed on the black sky ahead. ‘I can definitely see what looks like a glow along the bottom,’ he said. ‘Can you not see it at all?’

Bam turned and bellowed at the girls. ‘Oi! What do you reckon that cloud is, ladies? Can you see a red glow in it at all?’

Aleisha nodded.

‘Red or, like, orange,’ she said. ‘Flickering.’

Bam sighed. ‘It’s probably a fire then.’

‘You think?’

‘Yup.’

‘That’s a shed-load of smoke if it is,’ DogNut called from the front.

‘Well, there’s no one to put it out, is there?’ said Bam. ‘Look at all these houses, packed right next to each other. There’s so much stuff in them that’ll burn really easily once a fire takes hold. This whole place could go up.’

‘Looks a long way off,’ said Ed. ‘I don’t think we need to start panicking just yet.’

‘Well, you let us know, won’t you, Ed,’ said Jack, with a slight mocking tone. ‘When we *do* need to start panicking.’

‘Guys?’ Brooke sounded nervous. ‘I think that maybe *now’s* the time to start panicking.’

She was pointing down the road. There was a group of sickos ahead, crouching over something that was lying on the ground.

‘What do you reckon?’ said DogNut. ‘Fight them or go round?’

‘Come off it,’ said Ed. ‘We go round them, obviously. There’s no point fighting if we don’t have to. I mean, it’s not like we can’t go another way, is it?’

‘I say we fight them,’ said DogNut. ‘They don’t look much.’

‘What’s the point?’

‘Show them who’s boss. Show them we own these streets, blood.’

‘No,’ said Bam. ‘Ed’s right. Let’s go round. We should never fight if we don’t have to.’

‘Yeah, let’s take the chicken run,’ said Jack.

‘What do you mean?’ Ed asked, trying not to get angry.

‘The Yellow Brick Road. The way the cowardly lion would go.’

‘I’m not saying we go round them because I’m scared,’ said Ed. ‘It’s just stupid to get into a fight for no reason.’

‘I never said you were scared. I never said anything about you. Why do you assume I’m talking about you all the time? Don’t be so touchy.’ Jack looked round at the others. ‘Did I say that Ed was scared?’

They shook their heads and shrugged.

‘I’m not arguing with you, am I?’ Jack said to Ed. ‘I’m agreeing with you. Let’s go round them. OK?’

38

Matt and Archie had found their banner. An old Austrian military standard with a two-headed black eagle on a gold background. They were sitting round a table in the café adapting it. One of Jordan's boys had directed them to a store cupboard full of paint and brushes and various tools. They'd found some sheeting as well and cut out pieces that they'd glued on to cover the bits they didn't like. They would have preferred to sew the patches on but didn't know how. The banner would look pretty scrappy but it would do for now. When they had more time and resources they'd make a new one.

Matt had done some sketches for the design they were painting on to the bits of sheet. It had taken him a while to get the picture right, but he'd finally drawn one he was happy with. The image was based on his vision. When you looked at it one way, it was a picture of two different boys, one behind the other. Looked at another way it appeared to be a boy and his shadow. The main figure, the boy at the front, was fair-haired and dressed in white. The second boy, his shadow, was dark-haired and wore dark clothing. He was less detailed and looked sort of half-formed. Matt wasn't the greatest artist in the world, but there was something about his last drawing, a strange, haunting quality.

Transferring the image to the banner was like a school art project. Matt and Archie and their ten acolytes crowded round the banner, which was draped over the table, the edges dangling down. Matt had sketched in the outline with a big marker pen he'd found in a box in the museum shop and the others were filling in the shapes. They happily chatted away as they mixed the colours and daubed them on, utterly engrossed in their work.

‘Red for the eyes!’ said Phil, the youngest of the acolytes. ‘The Shadow Boy should have red eyes.’

‘It’s not a poster for a horror film,’ said Matt.

‘What colour then?’

‘Just leave them dark. And he’s not called the Shadow Boy. He’s the Goat. The shining one is the Lamb; the dark one is the Goat.’

‘Should he have horns?’

‘No. They’re not a real lamb and a real goat. Just paint him as I’ve drawn him.’

‘If we put on yellow rays it’ll look like the Lamb is glowing,’ said Harry, another of the acolytes.

‘All right. But do it carefully.’

‘What’s it going to say?’ Phil asked.

‘What do you mean, “say”?’

‘It has to have words on it.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Something in Latin,’ Harry suggested. ‘Like *Death to the enemy*.What would that be in Latin? Did anyone here do Latin?’

‘I did,’ said Archie. ‘I think *Death to the enemy* would be something like *nex ut hostes hostium*, or *mors ut hostes hostium*, something like that. I’m not really sure.’

‘We can’t put something on we’re not sure of,’ said Harry.

‘We should put the name of our Lord on it,’ said Matt. ‘The name of the Lamb.’

‘That’s an easy one,’ said Archie. ‘That’s *Agnus*, and *Agnus Dei* would be Lamb of God, or Lamb of the Lord.’

‘That sounds cool,’ said Phil. ‘*Agnus Dei*.’

Harry had the best handwriting. He’d done a calligraphy course at school and Matt had been getting him to write down his teachings in a big notebook they’d also scrounged from the shop. They were making their first testament. They’d argued for ages over what to call it. *The Book of the Lamb* sounded like a recipe book, and *The Book of Matt* didn’t sound right either. *The Book of Matthew* sounded too much like the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible, and Matt had gone to great lengths to explain that their new religion had nothing to do with Christianity and any of the old religions, even though he’d nicked most of it from the book of Revelations. In the end they’d decided to just call it *The Book*, and Harry had carefully drawn the words on the front cover in gothic script. After that he wrote down everything Matt came up with about his new religion. It turned out that Harry’s spelling wasn’t the best in the world, but his writing looked really cool so Matt let him keep his job.

Harry had tried suggesting that maybe their new religion could have its own special new kind of spelling but the others weren’t

convinced.

Once they'd filled in the two main figures Harry started on the words. But after twenty minutes he was still working on the A so they left him to it, sitting there, hunched over the banner at the table, his tongue between his teeth, a look of intense concentration on his face.

39

They had turned off the main road westwards towards the river and had started to weave their way through the tangle of side-streets, occasionally catching glimpses of the gasholders they were using as a landmark. These giant steel drums, painted pale green, towered above the surrounding buildings, but when the kids got in among the tightly packed houses their view of them was blocked.

There was no clear layout to the streets and the kids had to make detours round housing estates so their progress was slow. They felt really nervous now. There was much more evidence of the disaster on these side-streets, reminders of all that had happened. Fires, wreckage, dead bodies. They also spotted two different roving gangs of sickos and each time had to make another diversion to avoid them, ending up more lost and disorientated.

At last, though, by pure chance they came out on to a main road and there ahead of them was the blue-and-white Tesco logo on the front of a long, low, ugly building next to the inevitable car park. The gasholders were silhouetted against the sky behind them.

'What did I tell you!' DogNut cried triumphantly, and the kids cheered as they ran across the road.

Their excitement was short-lived, however.

The supermarket had been gutted.

The windows along the front were all smashed in, the shelves inside stripped clean. A few empty shopping trolleys stood forgotten and lonely among the debris of smashed tills and broken cabinets.

The kids wandered around glumly, glass crunching underfoot, hoping they might find something that had been missed.

There was nothing.

‘Well, that was a big waste of time,’ said Jack.

‘It was worth trying, though,’ said Bam.

‘Really? Was it?’

‘Come on, Jack, maybe let’s look on the bright side a little, yeah?’

‘The bright side of what?’

‘Well, at least there weren’t any sickos waiting for us in here.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that,’ said Brooke, and they turned to see her staring along one of the aisles.

They hurried over to her.

A skinny mother, her naked arms sticking out like twigs from her sleeveless puffer jacket, was waddling towards Brooke. She was maybe twenty-five, with short, spiky hair and she walked stooped over on bent legs, unable to stand properly. She looked at the kids, her big blue eyes sad and confused, then opened her bloodstained mouth and tried to say something, but only a strangled gargle came out. She coughed and looked embarrassed as a wad of saliva dripped over her lower lip and hung from her chin.

She started to move towards them, half crawling, half crouching, feeling her way along with her spindly arms out to either side.

‘Kill it, Bam,’ said Jack.

‘Shoot it,’ DogNut added.

Bam shook his head. The mother looked so pathetic. ‘Don’t know if I can.’

Ed stepped forward, rifle raised, the tip of the bayonet pointing at the mother’s face. She looked up at him, her eyes unnaturally large, and shiny, as if she was about to cry. She reminded him of something. For a moment he couldn’t place it and then it came to him. One of those stupid big-eyed characters from a Japanese manga comic.

He gripped his rifle tighter. Told himself she wasn’t human any more. She was just a mindless thing now, eaten up by disease, probably dying.

‘Do it, Ed.’ Jack’s voice sounded hard. Ed knew he didn’t believe he could.

Could he?

The thought of sticking the bayonet into her, feeling it sink into her flesh, pushing it hard enough to kill her, into her brain …

Could he do it?

Brooke pushed past him and grunted as she swung her club at the back of the mother’s head. The stricken mother collapsed face down with a little whimper and lay still.

‘See?’ said Brooke. ‘Told you I wasn’t totally useless. Not like you bunch of wimps. What’s the matter with you all? She was just some stupid sicko. Why can’t you just –’

Brooke stopped, clapped her hands to her face and ran round the

end of the row of cabinets to be noisily sick.

'Let's get out of here,' said Jack.

It was dark in the store. The strip lighting that ran in grey ranks along the low ceiling hung down dead and useless. When the kids trooped back outside, the suddenly bright sun caused them to blink and squint and shield their eyes so that it was a few seconds before they spotted a group of sickos tramping towards them across the car park.

There were about twenty of them, in various stages of decay. The worst were at the back, the slowest, most diseased. They were limping, hunched up, their skin almost totally covered in boils and sores, or else hanging off them in sheets. Their faces were unrecognizable as human, shapeless, raw, bloody and swollen. Noses missing, ears missing, eyes missing, their cheeks either puffed out and swollen, or rotted away, exposing their teeth. Those at the front were the healthier ones, younger, faster and fitter, but still visibly sick, their flesh discoloured and bloated, their bodies ravaged by the poison that was erupting from within.

At the front, as if he was leading them, was a tall, black-haired father with crazed yellow eyes. He was wearing a long dark coat that flapped in the wind.

'Omigod, it's Pez!' Brooke gasped.

'What?' Jack had no idea what she was talking about.

'The one in charge, he looks like one of those Pez sweet-dispenser things. He was there before, at the bus. He must have followed us.'

Despite everything Jack laughed. She was right. The father's head was tilting back, leaving his unattached lower jaw dangling and his tongue lolling out over his lower lip. Jack had a strong urge to stand and fight, to stop running and hiding, to hack this human Pez down with his sword. He didn't want to put the others in any danger, though.

'Let's get away from here!' he shouted, and they ran.

They skirted round the supermarket and into an industrial area behind it. They could smell the gas from the towers here; its pungent odour got everywhere. After a couple of minutes of furious, breathless, lung-busting running the kids darted into a sort of yard with garages and lock-ups round the edges and an alley at the back.

'Stop!' said Bam, looking around. 'We should be safe here. I'll check to see they haven't followed us, but if we stay put for a while they'll surely give up searching and bugger off.'

DogNut and Bam went over to the entrance to the yard and looked out.

'No sign of them,' said DogNut after a while. 'I reckon we lost them.'

‘This is crazy,’ Courtney gasped. The big girl was fighting for breath and she looked pale and scared. Her eyes kept flicking around, not settling on anything. ‘We don’t know what we’re doing. It’s too dangerous out here. I think we should go back.’

‘I agree,’ said Aleisha. ‘We ain’t gonna find nothing.’

Then Jack’s voice caused them all to turn round. ‘There’s a lorry in that alleyway.’

‘What?’ Ed frowned at him.

‘I said there’s a lorry in that alleyway.’

‘So what?’

‘So I think it’s a Tesco delivery truck. We should check it out.’

‘Wait a minute.’ Ed put his hands up, palms towards Jack. ‘Call me a coward if you want, but I don’t think that’s a great idea.’

‘Why?’ said Jack. ‘What’s going to happen?’

‘It was like this when we were ambushed at The Fez.’

‘There’s no one around, Ed.’

‘That’s what it was like then. They came from nowhere. They were waiting for us. That lorry could be a trap.’

Jack laughed. ‘What bloody sickos are going to be able to drive a lorry up an alley and hide it?’

‘So why’s it there, then?’

‘I don’t know, do I?’ said Jack. ‘I’m just saying we should have a look.’

‘You weren’t there in Rowhurst,’ Ed pleaded. ‘You don’t know what it was like …’

But Jack was already walking over to the alleyway.

Ed called after him, ‘Jack!’

The others could do nothing but follow. The alley was just wide enough to fit the width of the lorry that was about ten metres down. It sat there in the darkness, a solid, menacing shape, blocking the way like some great beast in a lair ready to dash out and catch its prey. Before he was halfway there Jack wished he hadn’t been so hasty. Ed was right – it would be too easy to get trapped in the narrow space. Then he heard his friends behind him and it gave him the confidence to carry on.

The lorry had a streamlined hood on the top of the square blunt cab that clearly said Tesco and there was a manufacturer’s logo in the middle of the black radiator grille – ‘MAN’. Jack smiled to himself. It was like a sign. It’d be funny if there actually *was* a man sitting there inside the cab like a neatly labelled exhibit, but it was too dark to see.

The lorry was jammed in, making it impossible to open the doors. The radiator grille, however, was made up of three bars, like the rungs of a ladder. Well, that was an invitation if ever Jack’d seen one. He reached for the wipers to get a grip and hoiked himself up.

There *was* a man sitting there, in the driver's seat, and Jack didn't know whether to laugh or scream.

He was dead, his skin bloated and puffy, covered with a layer of white mould that gave it a soft, fluffy look. His eyes were sunk into his swollen face like two little black holes. He reminded Jack of something.

A snowman.

It was quite uncanny. The resemblance was made even stronger by the fact that the driver had a vivid red nose, lumpy and crusted with blisters like a carrot that had been left too long in the bottom of the fridge.

Hell, he was even wearing a little hat and a scarf.

Now Jack started laughing and had to let go and jump back down.

'What is it?' said Bam, the first to join him by the lorry.

'Look in there,' said Jack, snorting with laughter. 'There's a bloody snowman!'

Bam climbed up and a moment later he was standing next to Jack, doubled over and barking.

'You are *sick*,' he managed to gasp between laughs.

'Is that, like, a dead body in there?' said Courtney, too squeamish to look.

'Sure is,' said Bam. 'As dead as they come.'

'Well, let's get out of here then. That's creepy.'

'We need the lorry, Courtney,' said Jack.

'What for?'

'What do you think? Can't you read?'

'Yeah, I can read.'

'And what does that say?'

'Tesco.'

'Exactly. It's a Tesco delivery lorry. It could be full of food.'

Courtney stared at the cab and wrinkled her nose. 'Yeah, well,' she said. 'I can't see *him* driving it very far.'

'I'm gonna check out the back,' said Jack, and, using the bumper, the grille and the wing mirrors he scrambled up on to the roof of the cab. Behind the cab was what looked like a long blue container. He climbed over the sloping hood and hopped up on to it. It was made of thin metal that banged and clanged beneath his feet as he made his way to the rear.

His heart was pounding, as much with hope as with fear. If the container was intact, it might be filled with food. A very valuable load. Why else would the snowman have driven in here if not to escape looters, or hijackers? He'd probably been on his way to Tesco and had come down here to hide, and then tried to sit it out. He could have starved to death, or he could have been taken by the disease. It

was impossible to tell.

Well. He might have escaped the marauding sickos, but in the end he hadn't been able to escape death.

Jack got to the end and dropped on to his belly. He peered over the edge, hardly daring to look. The back of the lorry appeared to be untouched. Unopened.

He grinned from ear to ear.

He heard a clatter behind him and twisted round to see Ed and Bam climbing up on to the container.

'Well?' Bam called out to him. 'Don't keep us in suspense.'

Jack sat up, too excited to speak. He gave them a double thumbs up.

'You think there might be food in here?' Bam asked, smiling too.

Jack nodded his head as Ed ran over to take a look.

'We need to check inside,' he said. 'It could be empty, or all rotted.'

'Now who's the pessimist?' said Jack.

'I don't want to get everyone's hopes up and then find it's a lorry-load of shampoo or something.'

'We have to get into the cab,' said Bam.

'What for?' Ed frowned at him.

'Think about it. The snowman – he drove in here and you can't open the doors of the cab, right?'

'Right.'

'That means he must still have the keys with him. We can use them to open the back, and if it *is* food we could just ditch the snowman and drive the whole bloody rig back to the museum and unload it back there.'

'You know how to drive a lorry?'

'Nope. But since things all went pear-shaped I've learnt a lot of new skills. I'd be happy to add lorry driver to my list.'

They returned to the front of the lorry and climbed down. The other kids were waiting for them in the alley.

'OK. We need to get the keys out of there,' said Bam. 'Any volunteers?'

Unsurprisingly there were none.

'Didn't think so.'

'I'll help,' said Ed.

'Help who?' said Bam.

'Help you,' said Ed. 'It was your idea.'

'Oh, cheers.'

'There's a little sort of skylight thing in the roof of the cab,' said Jack. 'You know, like a sunroof? If you could get it open you could get in that way.'

Ed and Bam climbed back up and using Ed's bayonet and DogNut's club they managed to batter and bend and lever the sunroof up until it came away, leaving a rectangular hole in the top of the cab. Instantly a foul stench of putrefaction wafted out, accompanied by a squadron of flies. The boys dropped back, groaning and gagging, their eyes watering.

'I will *never* get used to that smell,' said Bam. 'That is *rank*. I really don't think I can go in there, Ed.'

Ed took a deep breath. 'I'll do it.'

He eased himself through the narrow hole, feeling for the passenger seat with his feet. Then dropped down.

It was even worse inside the cramped cab. There were flies everywhere and the air was foul. Ed kept one hand clamped over his mouth and nose and tried not to look at the snowman, who was clutching the wheel with rotten hands. He got a brief glimpse of his face. There were maggots around his nostrils and lips. Ed leant over him and fumbled around the steering column and dashboard, feeling for the keys. He had to press his body against the corpse. It felt soft and cold.

He tried to shut his mind down and just think about the keys, but it was hard. He could see the other kids outside staring up at him, and somehow that made it worse, seeing their looks of horror and disgust. He felt like a contestant on *I'm A Celebrity … Get Me Out of Here!* inside a glass box doing a bush-tucker trial.

Your challenge, Ed, is to go in there with a dead man and several buckets of maggots and find the keys. Your reward will be meals for the whole camp for the next six months.

'I can't find anything,' he called up to Bam.

'Try his pockets.'

Oh, Jesus.

Ed steeled himself and patted the snowman's pockets, still trying not to look. First the jacket and then the trousers.

'There's something in there,' he said.

'Keys?' Bam sounded excited.

'Could be.'

'Get them out.'

'I am *not* sticking my hand in there. It's all … wet.'

'You're gonna have to, Ed.'

Ed held his breath again and slowly, slowly slipped his fingers inside the pocket.

'God … It's disgusting. Oh, God.'

'Are the keys there?'

'There's something … Yes! Gottit!'

He jerked out his hand and proudly waved a chunky set of keys on

a fob up at Bam. Then he looked at his fingers. They were covered in slimy green and yellow paste.

'Yaaaaah!' He dropped the keys as if they were red hot and frantically flicked his fingers, then he wiped them on the passenger seat.

Bam was laughing.

'Good work, Ed! You're a star!'

Ed found a rag among the rubbish inside the cab and cleaned the keys, then he tossed them up to Bam, stood on the seatback, grabbed the rim of the sunroof and hauled himself out.

The kids below cheered as Bam helped Ed to his feet, and then the two of them raced along the top of the lorry and climbed down the far end.

There was a sort of big steel shutter in the back that rolled up into the roof of the container. Ed tried the most likely-looking key and slotted it into the lock at the bottom. Right first time. There was a satisfying clunk as the shutter popped open.

'Yes!' Ed cried, and the two of them slid the door up.

The lorry was filled almost to the door with rows of tall wire cages on wheels, held in place by red webbing straps. There must have been nearly fifty of them in all, and they were piled high with produce.

Canned fruit and vegetables, beans, cereal, toilet paper, fruit juice and soya milk, chocolate, peanut butter, jam, yoghurt, crisps and nuts. It was like someone had taken a small supermarket and packed everything from it into the back of this one lorry.

Ed and Bam grabbed each other by the forearms and yelled incoherently as they danced around in a circle.

'This'll last us weeks,' said Bam when they'd calmed down a little. 'And look! You're in luck. There *is* shampoo! We'll show that Jordan bloody Hordern. He'll be on his knees begging us for some of this lot.'

'We've still got to get it back to the museum, though,' said Ed.

'We've got the keys. We've got the muscle. We're on a roll. Let's rock! The good times are here to stay. I feel good about today, Ed. No, I don't feel good. I feel bloody great!'

40

When Ed and Bam came back to tell the others the good news, they found DogNut and Jack lifting the driver out through the sunroof, pulling him up by his jacket. They both had scarves wrapped round their faces, but the smell alone was enough to make you retch.

'We figured from all that shouting there was food in the back,' said Jack, his voice muffled.

'Tons of it,' said Bam. 'If we can get the lorry back to the museum, we've got it made.'

Jack looked round at Ed. 'Still think we shouldn't have come and taken a look, you wimp?' he said.

'It was a good call, Jack.'

'Yeah. Now give us a hand here.'

Ed took a deep breath and took hold of the body. Once it was clear of the opening they tipped it over the front of the cab. It rolled down the windscreen and flopped to the ground with a wet slap, spilling a small puddle of thin brown liquid.

The kids waiting below jumped back in alarm and swore at the boys on the roof who jeered at them.

'Make yourselves useful,' Jack said. 'Drag him away from here where we can't smell him. We've got to work out how to get this lorry moving.'

'I might be able to drive it,' said Justin.

'You?' Jack scoffed. 'What gives you that idea?'

'I used to play a computer game called *European Truck Simulator*.'

'I'll bet you did,' Jack laughed. 'I expect you played *Starship Commander* as well – doesn't mean you could fly a real rocket.'

'A lorry's a bit easier than a rocket,' said Justin, trying not to get

cross. ‘The principle’s roughly the same as a car.’

‘Yeah? And can you drive a car, in principle?’

‘Yes I can, actually. My dad gave me lessons on an old airfield near where we live. He was mad about cars. Me too. Though I’m more interested in trucks and lorries, really. Dad didn’t have a lorry to teach me in, though.’

‘You really think you can drive this?’ Ed asked, slithering down.

‘I watched Greg driving the bus,’ said Justin with a shrug. ‘It’s the same thing. I really think I could do it. I really do.’

‘I can drive and all,’ said DogNut. ‘Used to jack cars with me mates. I’ll sit with him. Between us we can work it out, I reckon.’

‘All right, we’re on!’ Ed clapped his hands together.

‘Oi, you lot!’ Jack called down from the roof. ‘Who’s moving that bloody body? It’s stinking the place out.’

He looked at Brooke and her friends. They made disgusted faces and backed away, shaking their heads.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Frédérique, stepping forward and picking up one of the snowman’s feet. She tried to pull him along, but couldn’t shift him. She had a determined, slightly mad look on her face, but it was clear she wasn’t going anywhere.

‘Come on.’ Brooke nudged Courtney. ‘We ain’t leaving her to do this. Makes us look bad. Grab a leg.’

‘Broo-ooke,’ Courtney protested.

‘We didn’t come along on this trip just to make sarcastic comments, did we?’ Brooke asked, grasping the other foot. ‘Or to hold the boys’ coats for them while they had a scrap. We got to pull our weight, or at least pull *his* weight.’ She sniggered. ‘Come on, shake a leg.’

Giving in to Brooke’s bullying, Courtney and Aleisha joined Frédérique, and the four of them started to drag the body along the alley towards the yard, keeping their faces pointing resolutely forward, away from the snowman. Trying not to think about what they were doing.

They got him to the end of the alley and pulled him over to the row of garages. It had been dark in the alley, which lay in shadow, and the sun felt suddenly warm and cheerful as they stepped into its light.

Brooke let go of the snowman’s foot and, closing her eyes, she turned her face up to the sun, feeling its warmth on her skin.

‘Oh, that feels so good,’ she said. ‘I have been *so* cold.’

‘Brooke,’ said Courtney. ‘Look at this …’

‘What?’ Brooke opened her eyes. Courtney was staring at the dead driver with a half-revolted, half-fascinated expression.

‘I don’t want to look,’ said Brooke. ‘It’s going to be something

horrible, isn't it?'

'Just look.'

'I can't …'

'You got to see this.'

Brooke clenched her teeth and forced herself to look round at the dead driver, prepared for the worst.

For a moment Brooke thought the snowman was coming back to life. His skin seemed to be boiling, as if liquid was bubbling up from beneath it, pushing it out into rippling blisters. Before their eyes his body was swelling, blossoming, bloating. His tongue poked out from between his lips, the tip of it studded with more blisters that popped as they hit the air. His hands were moving, the fingers wriggling and writhing. His neck was getting fatter and fatter, until it was thicker than his head. Then there was a hiss and sigh as his throat burst open, squeezing out bright pink jelly.

The only way Brooke could deal with what she was seeing was to imagine that she was watching a film. Something with over-the-top special effects. The driver didn't look human any more. She was absolutely mesmerized.

Someone tugged at her arm.

'What d'you want?' she said, turning round angrily, assuming it was one of the boys come to get her.

Instead she found herself looking into a black hole where a face should be. It was a young mother, with wavy hair that was once blonde but was now showing dark roots. She had eyes and a lower jaw with a row of teeth with silver fillings, but nothing in between.

Brooke felt like she'd been kicked in the guts. Her windpipe clenched shut. Her lungs froze. She opened her mouth and tried to scream but nothing came out.

While the three girls had been watching the driver a group of about fifteen sickos had entered the yard, attracted by the noise. They were all young adults, mothers and fathers, but they were in a terrible state, bloodied and battered, with bits missing, and skin ruined by craters and sores.

Aleisha, Brooke and Courtney had left their weapons behind in the alley so that their hands were free to drag the body, but Frédérique had her knife in a sheath on her belt. She pulled it out and started waving it at the sickos, yelling and screaming in French as the three other girls shouted for help.

Frédérique was like a wildcat, spitting with rage, a look of crazed fury on her thin face. Her blade slashed clumsily at the sickos, doing little real damage but confusing them enough to give the other three time to move away from where they'd been backed up against the garage doors. Frédérique at last managed to get close to a father. She

gouged him in the neck and he whined and went into a sort of stiff-legged dance. She stabbed again and again, the knife rising and falling like a piston.

'Leave him!' Brooke yelled. 'Get away, Frédérique!'

Frédérique didn't hear. All her fear and anger and sadness was coming out. She turned from the father and lunged at a bald mother, who stepped to the side. She snarled, the knife scything through the air, and waded right into the knot of sickos. The knife flashed in the sunlight, then punched into a father where it lodged in his armpit. Frédérique tried to tug it free but two mothers barged into her arm, loosening her grip on the handle. A third got her from behind, knocking her to her knees. She put her arms around her head to protect herself and curled forward, arching her back, defeated.

A father crouched over her, sniffing her hair. He was quickly joined by five others, who crowded round her, blocking her from view. Vultures on a carcass.

Unarmed, Brooke, Aleisha and Courtney could do nothing to help. The rest of the sickos had got between them and Frédérique and were now advancing on the girls, dribbling and moaning softly, sniffing the air.

Ed came skidding round the corner and when he saw what was happening he got hold of Aleisha and Courtney and dragged them back towards the alley, shouting at Brooke to follow.

Once in the alley they retreated towards the lorry, the sickos closing in after them.

'Where's Frédérique?' Ed asked.

'They got her,' said Brooke. 'They got her.'

'We can't leave her.'

'I ain't going back. Are you?'

Ed said nothing.

Bam and Jack were sitting on the roof of the cab. They could see the sickos advancing along the alley.

'Hurry up!' they shouted, waving their arms. 'For God's sake, run!'

41

Justin and DogNut were inside the cab, struggling to get the engine started. They had the windows wide open but it still stank something rotten in here. DogNut had found a whole packet of pine-tree-shaped air fresheners in the glove box and had ripped them out of their packaging and strewn them about the place. But he didn't think all the air fresheners in the world would be able to get rid of the smell of a fat dead lorry driver left to rot in his seat.

Yelling encouragement, Bam and Jack reached out to the girls, ready to drag them up on to the roof. They got Aleisha first, as Courtney started to clamber up the radiator grille by herself. Aleisha was so small she weighed almost nothing. Ed and Brooke waited their turn.

From inside the cab all Justin could see was a tangle of arms and legs as the girls wriggled up the windscreen. The engine didn't want to start. Probably because the diesel had got too cold. He was running out of ideas. Every time he turned the key there was a cough and a rumble, then nothing.

'Swear at it,' said DogNut.

'Do what?'

'Swear at it. It's what my dad used to do when his car wouldn't start. Sometimes worked.'

'OK,' said Justin. 'Bastard!'

'That word won't work,' DogNut sneered. 'Try something stronger.'

'Knob-end!'

'No, like this …'

As Justin turned the key, DogNut let out a filthy obscenity and the

next moment the engine jumped into life. They both roared. Then, as Brooke and Ed cleared the windscreen the two boys in the cab finally saw the sickos lumbering towards them, blocking the narrow alleyway, reaching towards them with scabby fingers.

'Bloody hell. We need to get motoring,' said DogNut. 'Put her in gear and let's get out of here.'

Justin sucked a lungful of air in through his nose, plunged the clutch pedal down with one foot, wrestled the gear lever into place and pressed down with his other foot on the accelerator. It was much harder than the simulation on his computer, but it was basically the same idea.

He forced the accelerator down further – and further – and further. It was nothing like a car. The engine was a monster and was pulling a monster load. There was no subtlety or delicacy involved. You had to work the pedals with heavy boots.

He could feel the whole rig shuddering, but it still didn't want to move. He was beginning to doubt whether he could do this after all. The size and power of the thing terrified him. He eased the clutch up further and gave the engine yet more juice. There was a thump and he looked up.

The lead sickos had got to the cab and were battering on the windscreen with dirty hands, leaving smears of pus and blood and filth.

'Get a move on, nerd-boy,' said DogNut nervously, then saw to his horror that one of the sickos had got hold of a lump of concrete and was getting ready to lob it at them. He was a younger guy, a teenager, and showed little sign of the sickness. He looked pretty much like any of the older boys from DogNut's estate. Like a junkie after a heavy night.

There was a flash and a bang and the sicko was thrown back against the wall.

'That must be Bam,' said Justin. 'We'd be rubbish without him.'

'Can we *please* get out of here,' DogNut shouted.

Two mothers had climbed up on to the front of the cab. One of them was the blonde without a face.

'Jesus, that's rank,' said DogNut. 'I can see right down her throat.'

Someone on top of the cab knocked the mother off and then took a swipe at the other sicko, catching her in the side of the head but failing to dislodge her.

The lorry shuddered, jerked forward and then stopped, throwing the mother clear.

The engine cut out.

'Do you want me to drive?' said DogNut.

'No,' said Justin. 'I'm getting the hang of it. Don't hassle me. I'm

all right.'

'Drive, dork, drive!'

Justin flushed red. He felt a cold rush of adrenalin wash through him on a rising tide of anger. In his mind he swore at DogNut, using the same words DogNut had used to swear at the lorry, and then told himself it was all OK.

Don't panic.

Engine on. Down with the clutch. Gear into position. Accelerator. Be brave. Do it.

The lorry just needed to be treated more brutally than a car. It was hard to give it too many revs.

Clutch up. Right up.

Now she was straining to move off.

Stamp on those pedals with all your weight.

And now they were moving. Inching forward, nudging the rest of the sickos out of the way. They could hear shouts of triumph from the roof.

'You're doing it, man,' said DogNut. 'Oh my days, you're doing it, you knob-end, you're doing it!'

Slowly and steadily the lorry ploughed on. Justin didn't dare try shifting up a gear so they stayed in first, crawling along, over-revving, fumes from the exhaust filling the alley.

The sickos limped and stumbled ahead of them, trying to get out of the way. A couple fell over, but the high clearance of the lorry meant that it passed right over them.

As they broke out into the winter sunlight at the end of the alley they saw someone standing directly in front of them. Justin was about to run them down when he realized it was Frédérique. He slowed and she drifted out of their way in a daze.

Up on the roof Jack spotted her. He called out her name and climbed down the side of the cab, using the open window as a footrest. He hung on the step for a moment then jumped clear and ran over to Frédérique.

'What happened? Are you all right? I didn't even realize you hadn't come back with the others. You must be a better fighter than I thought.'

'I'm all right,' Frédérique mumbled, and indeed she looked untouched. Jack took her by the wrist.

'Keep moving!' he shouted to DogNut through the window. 'Don't stop. I'll see you out on the road.'

He ran ahead of the lorry, pulling Frédérique along behind him.

*

Justin was sweating and trying not to panic. Going in a straight line

was relatively easy, but turning was a different matter. The steering wheel was huge and you had to force it round and round to make the wheels rotate even a little way. And then there was the immense length of the lorry to deal with, plus the fact that it was jointed and turned in two parts.

Trying to ease past the garages they smashed into the corner of a wall and demolished it. They scraped along and Justin thought of the scene in *Titanic* when the ship hits the iceberg.

DogNut was laughing hysterically and swearing at him.

'If you would just shut up, I could handle this,' Justin complained.

'No way you could, man,' said DogNut. 'You are *totally* out of control.'

'I can't concentrate with you yelling at me.'

'Nah, you need someone to light a fire under you, to get you rocking and rolling,' DogNut laughed. 'Now go for it, dweeb!'

'Shut up!'

They trundled out into the road and crushed a car before Justin managed to get the wheel turned far enough, and then he had to spin it all the way back in the other direction to straighten up. He didn't do it in time, and before he could stop they'd crossed the road and trashed another car.

'This is insane!' DogNut shouted, but the engine stalled and the lorry at last came to a halt.

Jack ran over and told Justin to wait until everyone was safely off the roof and then went round to open the back. Ed and Bam and the girls scrambled down and followed him, wide-eyed and excited, as if they'd all just been on the most thrilling theme-park ride in the world. Finding Frédérique unhurt had been the topper. Ed reckoned the sickos must have left her alone to come after the richer pickings in the alley.

Jack whistled as he saw how much food was inside the lorry and there was an elated party mood as the others piled in to check it out. They were all talking at once, over each other, not listening, laughing, almost crying with joy.

There was just room for them to squeeze on and once they were all safely on board Jack shouted to Justin to get going and then climbed up the tailgate to join his friends inside. The whole lorry shook as the engine started up again.

The lorry slowly picked up speed until it was crawling along at a steady pace. Jack looked out at the road as it unspooled behind them. Then he made a quick decision and pulled Ed to one side.

'I'm going,' he said.

Ed was still buzzing. He didn't really take in what Jack had said.

'OK, cool,' he said, and hugged his friend.

‘Did you hear what I said?’

Ed shook his head. ‘Not really, no,’ he said, and laughed. ‘Was it important?’

‘I’m going home.’

‘Back to the museum?’

‘No, to Clapham, to my old house. Like I always said I would.’

‘What?’ Ed stopped laughing instantly, as if someone had chucked a bucket of iced water over him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We’re halfway there,’ said Jack. ‘I could be home in less than an hour.’

‘Yeah, but I thought finding all this food … it’s changed everything, hasn’t it?’

‘Why?’

‘I mean, you can’t leave all this.’

‘I’ll come back. It’s not far. I’ll get my things and –’

‘No, Jack. It’s too dangerous.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Jack bluntly. ‘I always meant to go home. And now I won’t be leaving you lot in the crap any more. Not now you’ve got all this.’

‘Jack –’

‘You’re all right, Ed,’ Jack interrupted, shaking Ed by the shoulders. ‘You’ve got food, you’ve got shelter, you’ve got friends, weapons, girls. You don’t need me any more.’

‘I do, Jack … you’re my mate.’

‘You said it yourself, last night, though, Ed. I’ve been giving you a really hard time lately. I would’ve thought you’d be glad to get shot of me. I’ve been a right pain in the arse, I know that. And that’s why I need to get away. To clear my head. To go home. To get back in touch with how things used to be.’

‘And then you’ll come back?’

‘Of course I will. I’ll probably be back tonight.’ Jack grinned at Ed.

‘What if you don’t come back, though? What if something happens?’

‘I’ll be all right.’ Jack slapped his sword. ‘I’ve got this.’

‘Jack …’

‘You know me, Ed. Stubborn bastard.’

Bam had been listening in. He leant over and held the shotgun out to Jack.

‘Take this, mate,’ he said. ‘With any luck I won’t need it any longer.’

‘No, you keep it, Bam. You’re the shotgun king. I’m fine with my sword.’

‘Well, then, let me come with you.’

‘No way, Bam,’ Jack protested. ‘I don’t want to be responsible for

anyone else. That's why I'm going. These kids, they need a dad to look after them, but I'm not ready to be a dad yet. It's hard work. Worrying about everything, looking after everyone. I used to laugh at my mum for getting anxious if I was out late. But I know what it feels like now, being responsible, being scared, and I don't like it. I'm going. OK? This is my decision and it doesn't affect anyone else.'

'And it's my decision to come with you, mate,' said Bam. 'My decision. My choice. My risk. I won't hold you responsible. You won't have to worry about me.'

'I don't need anyone!' Jack turned away from his friends.

The lorry was snorting and hissing, shuddering as it started to accelerate. Justin was obviously getting the hang of the controls, risking a gear change. Jack jumped down off the back before it was too late.

Ed stared helplessly at him, thinking he might never see him again. And then Bam was on his way too. He vaulted over the back, stumbled in the road as he landed then ran after Jack and slapped him on the back. Jack threw up his hands, then Bam said something to him and he laughed.

As Ed watched the two of them growing smaller Frédérique came and joined him at the tailgate.

'What are they doing?' she asked nervously.

'Jack just wants to check his old house out,' Ed explained, trying to play it down and not upset her. Not upset himself either, to be honest. 'It's not far from here,' he added, wanting to believe it. 'He'll be back later.'

His efforts were obviously failing. Frédérique looked terrified.

'He cannot go. He must not leave me.'

'Hey, you're all right now, Fred. We're all gonna be all right. There's plenty of others at the museum who can look out for you until he's back.'

'He must not go …'

The lorry was getting faster and faster. Jack and Bam were walking in the opposite direction, already two distant figures. Ed tugged at his hair. How could they be so reckless? So unafraid? Strolling off like that. Who knew what was out there? It was crazy.

He suddenly felt very alone. Something clicked inside him. He grabbed Frédérique and shoved her at Brooke.

'Make sure Fred's all right,' he said to the startled blonde.

'Why, what's going on?'

Ed was light-headed, drunk almost. And yet everything suddenly seemed very clear and simple. It was as if he had just woken up and cast off a dark heavy suffocating blanket. He wouldn't be afraid any more. He wouldn't be alone. He would be free, and alive. Nothing

really mattered and as a result he could do anything he wanted.

He kissed Brooke and swung out over the tailgate, hanging there for a moment dramatically.

'We'll be home for tea!' he shouted. 'And I expect a decent spread as well.'

42

From the shadows of a burnt-out house at the side of the road a figure watched the three boys with red, sore eyes. He'd been following them all morning, waiting for his moment. He'd lost them a while back, but the noise of the lorry had alerted him and now here they were again.

Close enough to taste.

Not yet. Not yet. Wait some more. Watch some more. The time would come.

Shut up! Stop talking! Those voices in his head. Why wouldn't they just shut up? There was too many of them in there, all talking at once, too many to fit, crammed in, bursting his head. It was going to split open.

His head was going to split open. Split open. His head. Like a peach.

Not yet! Not yet!

Shut up!

He shook his head violently, a dog with a rat in its jaws. Spraying sweat everywhere.

He was shivering. Shivering and sweating at the same time. His nose was running, pouring snot down into his mouth. He hardly noticed. He noticed the itch, though, like stinging nettles under the skin. He would scratch his skin off if he could. Skin. Skin a rabbit. Dress it.

Why would you dress a rabbit? What was a rabbit? He couldn't remember. Why was it so hard to remember anything? An animal? Yes.

He rubbed his neck. It was ringed with boils, like a horrible shiny yellow scarf.

Never mind that.

The boys were there. The ones he wanted. The boys who had done …

What had they done? He didn't remember. He only knew he hated them. He wanted to smash them and crush them like insects. He wanted to tear the flesh from their bones. He would eat them. He would eat them, but first he would make …

Soap …

Soup?

He would make soup of them.

Soup? What was soup?

Something.

Rabbit soup.

His mind kept spinning away from him. But there was an important thing to pin down, fix there. Superglue. Yeah … The very important thing. The big thing. The thing that they had done wrong to him. To his boy.

His boy. That was it. His boy. His boy who was … little …? Little boy? He had a name, but the big boys had taken his name, they'd taken his son, they'd taken his son from him. His boy. Lee-am

His Liam.

Yes. He grinned. And as his skin tightened it pulled at the sores around his mouth, making them bleed. They'd tried to take Liam from him. But they couldn't – he was too clever for them. Clever clogs. That was him. Cleverer than them. Yes. He had kept Liam. They didn't know that, did they? Kept him with him. Kept him safe. Always.

But he would get the boys. He would do them. He would skin them. He would dress them. He would do it. He knew how to do it. He was a …

What was the word?

Pooch?

Butch?

Teacher?

Not a teacher – he hated teachers – a pusher.

No.

Come on, clever clogs, think!

A butcher.

That was it.

Mr Clogs the Butcher. And he had the thing to prove it. The tool thing hanging at his belt. He'd had it with him all the time. Clever, see?

A clever. That was it. No, not a clever. A cleaner. A leaf cutter. A leaver. The thing the butcher used. A cleaver. A clever cleaver.

Boys … Meet the cleaver.

A meat cleaver. He was a butcher. He had his cleaver and he would do butcher to them.

He smiled wider, the blood smeared round his mouth like a clown's painted smile. The boys were walking away. But he could follow, because the meaty, juicy stink of them hung in the air like something he could see and touch.

He picked up his bundle, hugged it to his chest and followed.

43

'Frédérique's not too happy about you going, you know.'

'That's exactly what I mean,' said Jack. 'I can't be responsible for everyone.' His shoulders were hunched, his head drooping. 'I can't look after her. I don't know how.'

Ed wasn't going to give up. 'She really likes you,' he said, slinging his rifle on to his back. 'Don't you like her?'

'Yeah, I think so. No, I *do*. I like her a lot,' said Jack.

Ed leant over and picked a long hair off Jack's coat.

'What's this I find?' he said, holding it between finger and thumb so that it twisted in the air. 'Evidence!'

'You're going to start singing in a minute, aren't you?' said Jack.

'Singing what?'

'Jack and Fred sitting in a tree, kay-I-ess-ess-I-en-gee.'

'Well?' Ed raised his eyebrows.

'It's not like that,' said Jack, the white half of his face reddening. 'She's just latched on to me.'

'And you don't like her?'

'I'd like her more if she could stop crying for five minutes. There's something making her miserable and I can't get through to her. I can't get her to tell me what it is.'

'She's just freaked out by everything,' said Bam. 'We all are, and we all deal with it in different ways.'

'How do *you* deal with it?' Ed asked.

'You know me,' said Bam. 'I do things. Get physical. Same way I've always done. Rugger's a good cure for real life.' He paused and turned to Jack with a leer. 'So, *do* you fancy her?'

'I haven't really thought about it.'

‘Yeah?’ It was obvious Bam didn’t believe him. ‘You reckon? Nice bit of French totty.’

‘All right,’ said Jack. ‘Maybe a bit.’

‘Ooh la la! Just a bit?’

‘Look. She’s all right. I like her. OK? She’s nice-looking. A bit thin perhaps …’

‘Thin?’ Bam snorted. ‘She’s skinny as six o’clock.’

‘But she’s OK,’ said Jack. ‘You know what I mean? Maybe if things had been different I might have done something about it, I don’t know. I can never, like, *tell* with girls, whether they just like me as a, you know, just as a person, or whether they fancy me. I’m always scared of mucking up.’

‘Well, I reckon you’re in there anyway, mate,’ said Bam.

‘So what about you and Brooke, then?’ Jack asked Ed, trying to move the spotlight on to someone else.

‘What *about* me and Brooke?’

‘When are you gonna make a move on her?’

Ed sniggered. Remembering. ‘You know what I just did back there?’

‘What?’

‘I kissed her.’

‘You never? What, in front of everyone?’

‘It wasn’t, like, a proper snog or anything,’ said Ed. ‘It was more like a sort of movie kiss. I was sort of acting. You know, like a soldier going on a dangerous mission kissing his girl goodbye. Maybe she’ll wait for him, maybe she won’t kind of thing.’

‘Oh, she’ll wait for you. You’re well in there, mate,’ said Bam.

‘Yeah,’ said Jack. ‘She only goes for good-looking blokes, and I’m spoken for. There’s no one else around she’d look twice at.’

‘Oi!’ said Bam. ‘What about me?’

‘What *about* you?’ said Jack. ‘You’re hideous, Bam. You’re a kind of troll.’

‘I am *not*. I had a girlfriend back home if you really want to know.’

‘A real one or an imaginary one?’ said Jack.

‘She was a picture in a magazine, I reckon,’ said Ed, joining in the game.

‘She’s a real girl, thank you,’ said Bam. ‘With arms and legs and everything.’

‘Everything?’

‘Far as I know. We hadn’t got much past the kissing stage. And now …’ Bam sighed and gave a little grunt. ‘God knows if I’ll ever see her again.’

‘What was her name?’ Jack asked innocently. ‘John? Barry?

Roger?'

'Cass, if you must know.'

'I thought you only liked rugger, Bam?'

'I'm a man of the world, Ed. There's more to me than you will ever know.'

'There's certainly more to you than I will ever *want* to know,' said Jack. 'Already that's way too much information. The thought of you and poor Cass getting all loved up on a sofa somewhere …'

'Leave it out, Jack,' said Bam. 'Why are you two picking on me, anyway?'

'We're only having a laugh, Bam,' said Ed. He put an arm across Bam's shoulders and they walked a few steps linked together.

'So you're going to make a move on Brooke, then, are you, Bam?' said Jack.

'Brooke? No way! She's not my type at all. She's scary as all hell. You're welcome to her, Ed.'

'She's all right once you get past her front,' said Ed. 'But in the past she wouldn't have looked twice at me. I'm not her type, really. I'd have thought she'd be more interested in someone like DogNut. And you can see he fancies her. He's always sniffing around.'

'Oh, come off it, Ed!' Jack scoffed. 'I thought you understood girls. You can tell she's not the slightest bit interested in him. He's like an over-affectionate dog, sticking his nose up your arse all the time.'

The three of them laughed as they marched along. For one small moment they could forget about survival and pretend that nothing had changed.

They'd ended up back near the gas towers and they stopped so that Jack could work out which way they should be going.

'That gas sure does smell rotten,' said Ed, wrinkling his nose. 'Stupid thing is, there's probably enough gas in those holders to last us the rest of our lives, if we only had some way to get it out.'

Bam wasn't listening. He was looking up at the sky and shading his eyes from the sun. The thick black cloud they'd seen earlier had grown larger.

'I don't think the smell's all from the gasholders,' he said. 'That smoke's definitely getting worse. Either *we're* getting nearer to it or *it's* getting nearer to us.'

'Bit of both, I reckon,' said Ed. 'Must be some way off still, though.'

He sniffed the air. 'You reckon that's the smoke we can smell?'

'Yeah,' said Jack. 'Like a coal fire mixed with a sort of cooking smell.'

'And something rotten, like food that's gone off, unless that's the gas,' Bam added. 'Not nice at all. What if the fire spreads right up to

the museum?'

'It won't,' said Jack. 'It's been too wet lately.'

'If it's hot enough, it'll burn anything,' Ed pointed out. 'No matter how wet.'

'Come on, guys,' said Jack, moving off. 'Let's get on. There's nothing we can do about it.'

'Yeah,' said Ed, and he coughed. He definitely tasted smoke in the air.

44

‘Who’s this Angus Day, then?’

The younger kids from the Brains Trust had come through into the museum café to get away from Matt and the rest of his gang who were out in the atrium having a religious discussion, and Harry was proudly showing off his fancy lettering.

‘*Agnus* Day,’ he sneered, mocking their stupidity. ‘It says *Agnus* Day.’

‘Well, who’s Agnes Day?’ said Jibber-jabber. ‘And why have you made a flag for her? Is she your girlfriend?’

‘It’s Latin, dumbo,’ Harry explained, with as much scorn in his voice as he could. ‘It means “Lamb of the Lord”.’

‘That definitely says Angus Day, actually,’ said Wiki. ‘You’ve written *Angus* not *Agnus*. And *Dei* is spelt D-E-I, not D-A-Y.’

‘You’re joking,’ said Harry. ‘I’ve not got it wrong, have I? Matt’ll kill me. We spent ages working on this.’

‘You’re not even close,’ said Wiki.

‘Bollocks, I knew I should have got Matt to write it down for me.’

‘Write what down?’ said Matt, walking in with Archie Bishop and the other acolytes.

‘The name of your new god,’ said Wiki.

‘Why? What’s he done?’ Matt read the banner. ‘You idiot, Harry. What is that? You’ve ruined it. We’ll have to start all over again now.’

‘Bit of a boring name for a new god, Matt,’ said Jibber-jabber. ‘Angus can’t really compete with Thor or Zeus or Buddha.’

‘Yeah,’ said Wiki, joining in the fun. ‘Jehovah, Hades, Baal, Osiris, they sound really exciting, but Angus Day sounds more like a newsreader.’

‘Maybe it’s on purpose,’ said Archie seriously, and everyone turned to look at him, including Matt, who was red-faced with anger and embarrassment.

‘I didn’t do it on purpose!’ Harry protested. ‘I was doing my best. I really was. I thought I’d got it right.’

‘Exactly,’ said Archie. ‘So maybe the Lamb was working through you. It’s like the pages, and Matt’s visions – we don’t choose any of it. Everything has been shown to us by the Lamb. Isn’t that right, Matt?’

‘Er, yeah, that’s right,’ said Matt, backing Archie up but not really sure where this was going.

‘So the Lamb must have been working through Harry,’ Archie went on. ‘Showing him something that we wouldn’t have seen otherwise. He *made* Harry put the wrong words on there. Except they’re *not* wrong, they’re right, you see? They’re what he was supposed to paint on there all along.’

‘Angus Day?’ said Jibber-jabber, not sounding convinced. ‘Why would he want you to write Angus Day?’

‘We don’t know why, not yet, but we’ll find out,’ said Archie. ‘It’ll be shown to us.’

Matt stood there, struggling to find something good in this. He could see what Archie was doing. He was trying to make the best of it and stop the others from laughing at them. But Matt *really* wished that Harry hadn’t got it so wrong. Not *both* bloody words.

Angus Day! If Matt wasn’t so furious, he would have been laughing too.

One of Jordan’s boys came in. He glanced expressionlessly at the banner then looked round at the kids.

‘Your mates are back,’ he said. ‘Nice flag. Who’s Angus Day?’

45

The smell had got worse – deeper, thicker, more intense. It was a strange mixture of familiar comforting smells, like bonfires and barbecues and wood-burning stoves, all jumbled up with unpleasant smells that shouldn't go together with them – rotting food, chemistry lessons, dust and blocked toilets.

'How come we can smell rotting food and cooking food at the same time?' said Bam, wrinkling his nose as he walked.

'Maybe it's not rotting food,' said Ed. 'Maybe it's chemicals of some sort.'

'Great,' said Bam. 'We're probably being poisoned as we speak.'

'It's the gas from the holders,' said Jack. 'Must be.'

Ed stopped in the road. 'Should we turn back?'

'You can cut out if you want,' said Jack, who carried on walking. 'But I'm not giving up now.'

'Wait, guys, look at that.'

Bam was staring at a big redbrick building that rose up six storeys high.

'That's the main stand of the Oval cricket ground,' said Ed. 'I was there last summer.'

'I know what it is,' said Bam. 'I don't mean the Oval, I mean *that* …'

Ed and Jack peered at the building, trying to work out what Bam was going on about.

And then they saw it.

Clustered round the gates to the ground were police cars, military vehicles, crowd control barriers, an outside broadcast van with a TV transmitter on the roof.

People moving about.

'Oh my God,' said Ed, his insides lurching. 'Is that for real?'

'Well, it's not a mirage, is it?' said Jack. 'It's not like we're in the desert or anything. So I'd say, yes, it must be real.'

Ed tried not to get his hopes up. Maybe, though, just maybe, they'd been wrong. Things hadn't fallen completely apart. His heart was racing, thoughts chasing each other round his tired mind.

'Civilization,' said Bam. 'If the police and the army are there, then, I mean, then we're saved. There are people still alive, proper people, adults not affected by the disease. You know what this means, don't you? There might be a cure after all.'

'I don't know,' said Jack. 'I don't know what it means.'

'Well, let's go and find out,' said Bam.

'Be careful,' said Jack. 'I've seen films where the survivors try to get help and the army thinks they're infected and they shoot them.'

'Let's risk it,' said Bam.

They moved out of the road on to the pavement where they hurried along, keeping close to the buildings even though Ed pointed out that there was a greater risk of being ambushed by any sickos who might be hiding in the area.

'Come off it,' said Bam. 'There won't be any sickos within a million miles of here, not with that lot waiting for them over there.'

'Guys?' said Jack, slowing down.

'What?'

'Why are we assuming that the police and the army and whoever are going to be alive?'

'Oh crap,' said Ed, skidding to a halt and ducking behind a parked car. 'Good point.'

'But I can see people moving about,' said Bam.

'What sort of people?' Ed asked.

'A couple of soldiers, a policeman.'

'Are they diseased soldiers, or are they fit and healthy soldiers?'

'It's too far away to tell with my lousy eyesight.'

'Then we should be very, very bloody careful until we can be sure either way,' said Jack.

Now they darted from car to car, trying to keep out of sight as they steadily worked their way closer.

'When I get back to the museum, I'm going to get a pair of binocs,' said Bam.

'I'm going to get a tank,' said Ed. 'Life would be a lot easier in a tank.'

At last they were near enough to see clearly what was going on. They hid behind a big black 4×4 and peered ahead.

'Bollocks,' Jack hissed.

There were two soldiers and a policeman walking around, but apart from that nothing was moving. It looked like a scene from a DVD on pause. Some big disaster movie. The security forces lined up ready for action … but staying absolutely still.

There were more soldiers sitting in Jeeps, and policemen in vans, a small crowd pressed up against some barriers, and not one of them stirred.

'They're all dead,' said Bam, deflated. 'Apart from those three, they're all dead.'

Now they became aware of more bodies, scattered everywhere. On the ground, in the vehicles, by the entrance gates to the Oval. It looked as if there had been a battle of some sort. Most of the dead bodies weren't in uniform. They were mothers and fathers, teenagers, many with bullet wounds.

'At least we know now what that smell was,' said Bam, covering his face with his scarf. 'It was two different things. The smell of the fire was masking the smell of dead bodies.'

'What d'you think was going on here?' said Ed.

'No idea,' said Jack.

'It looks like they were guarding something,' Ed suggested.

'The Oval?' said Jack. 'Why would the army want to guard a cricket ground? What were they – scared the public was going to break in and carry off the stumps?'

'You got a better suggestion?'

'Maybe there's something else inside,' said Bam. 'Maybe the government was stockpiling supplies, or weapons, or the crown jewels, or something?'

'We should take a look,' said Jack.

'What?' Ed spluttered. 'No way. We get well away from here. This is nothing to do with us.'

'There's only three of them moving about,' said Jack. 'We could take them easy.'

'But why bother?'

'Whatever's in there,' said Jack, 'it was obviously valuable enough for people to try and break in.'

'Sick people probably,' said Ed. 'Sick idiots who don't know anything.'

Jack sat in the road, his back against the car. 'It's definitely worth taking a look,' he said as the others squatted down next to him. 'What if it's like Bam says? A huge emergency food supply? We'd be set up for life. It'd make that lorry look like chicken feed.'

Ed had his hand clamped over his mouth and nose, trying to keep the stench out.

'Jack,' he said. 'I thought all you wanted was to get home.'

‘I know … I do … I really do. But we should still look. If we can get rid of those three mugs, we can find some more guns. There *have* to be guns there. Proper modern working guns. And then we’ll be invincible.’

Ed ground his teeth in frustration. ‘Why don’t we just go to yours?’ he said. ‘Do whatever it is you need to do, then get back to the museum before dark? We could come back here in the morning with some of the guys, DogNut and the others, a proper fighting unit.’

‘You’re such a coward, Ed,’ said Jack. ‘We’ll be all right. Just think what might be inside there waiting for us. The place is huge. I mean it’s the size of, well, the size of a cricket pitch, for God’s sake. There might be food. There might be weapons. There might even be medicine. All three!’

‘Come on, Ed,’ said Bam. ‘We’re here now. Let’s just find out what’s in there, or we won’t be able to think about anything else.’

‘All right, all right.’ Ed realized he was beaten. ‘We’ll look inside. But let’s see if there’s any guns first, like Jack said.’

They stood up and gave each other a high five, though Ed’s slap was pretty half-hearted. Then they carried on towards the Oval, staying low and using cars for cover.

Finally they sneaked across the road to the line of security vehicles.

They checked whether there were any more sickos moving about. As far as they could see, though, there were just the two soldiers and the policeman.

One of the soldiers had a small machine gun hanging over his shoulder on a strap, but now they were closer they realized he was pretty far gone, slow and clumsy, his face eaten away by disease. The other soldier was equally wrecked. In the boys’ experience the sicker the adults were the less likely they were to remember how to use any tools or weapons, and usually attacked with just their bare hands. The policeman was a complete mess, with one ear dangling down by his chin and his features replaced with a cluster of glistening blisters.

‘I’ll take the soldiers,’ Bam whispered, checking his shotgun. ‘You two go for the policeman.’

‘I can’t do it,’ said Ed. ‘I can’t just kill them.’

‘Come on,’ said Bam. ‘Look at them. We’ll be doing them a favour, putting them out of their misery.’

‘No.’ Ed squatted down behind a police van, covering his face with his hands.

‘You do it. I can’t.’

Jack tutted and drew his sword from its scabbard.

‘Wait here.’

‘All right.’

Ed couldn't watch. He crouched there, hands over his face. He heard his friends' footsteps. There was a moment's silence then there came two loud blasts, followed by the sounds of a scuffle and a body hitting the ground.

'You can come out now,' Jack called to Ed in a slightly sing-song way, as if talking to a toddler. 'It's all safe.'

Ed stood up, still not wanting to look. He walked round the van and over to where Bam and Jack were waiting for him. He was aware of the dark shapes of bodies on the ground.

He told himself that it didn't make any difference. That these were just three more bodies to add to the piles of corpses that were already here. He forced his eyes round. He had to accept the way things were now. Somehow he had to become as hardened as Jack and Bam.

Jack was wiping his sword clean on the dead policeman's jacket. Bam was pulling the machine gun off the soldier.

'You want this?' he said, offering it to Jack. 'I'm sticking with my shottie.'

'I sure do.'

'Do you know how to use that?' Ed asked as Jack started turning the gun in his hands.

'No – but I can find out.'

Parked on the other side of the outer wall that surrounded the grounds were four open-backed lorries. The sort builders used to remove rubble from building sites. They were piled high with corpses. Next to them was a fleet of ambulances, their back doors hanging open, paramedics lying by the wheels.

Whenever he'd watched the news he'd never imagined that one day he'd be part of a story. But now the news had come to town in a big way and there was no one left to record it. The corpses by the TV cameras were blind and deaf. There were no zombified news reporters standing there giving the viewers the statistics.

'The whole population of London has been wiped out …'

Ed went over to a military Jeep, where two squaddies with blackened faces and hands sat in the front seats as if waiting to drive off. They were wearing white facemasks, presumably to stop them breathing in anything noxious. Above the masks their eyes were clouded. Flies crawled all over them.

They both had side arms in holsters.

Ed carefully unbuckled the belt from the soldier in the passenger seat and strapped it round his waist. The pistol hung heavy and solid at his side. The driver had a pair of binoculars round his neck. Ed fished them off and chucked them over to Bam who thanked him with a big cheesy grin.

Ed did a quick check of the bodies of the other soldiers and

policemen. They were all wearing facemasks.

He walked through the open gates and over to the line of ambulances where he jumped up into the back of one. There was a green-clothed paramedic lying on the floor, his face lumpy with yellow spots. His facemask hadn't prevented him from getting sick, but Ed figured that if he could find one it would at least keep some of the smell out.

With any luck there would be other useful stuff in here as well.

He took off his backpack and went through the ambulance, grabbing anything that looked like it might come in handy and stuffing it in the bag. Painkillers, antiseptic, bandages, antibiotics, scalpels, syringes, rubber gloves, it was all good stuff. And there, finally, in a taped-up cardboard box, a supply of spare masks. He dumped a handful in the top of the bag, but kept three out.

He hopped down off the ambulance. Jack and Bam were walking over discussing how the machine gun worked. Neither of them really had a clue.

'You ready?' said Jack when he saw Ed.

'Here.' Ed handed out the masks. 'Put these on. They'll protect you from the smell at least.'

All the doors in the main stand were securely locked so the boys circled the building looking for another way in. Finally they came to a more modern part where the big glass doors stood open. There were more dead soldiers here, splayed out on the polished floor of a large entrance area. The boys peered cautiously into the gloom.

'You first,' said Bam, mock politely.

'After you,' said Jack. 'I insist.'

Ed pushed past them, shaking his head, determined to prove that he wasn't a coward. The other two followed, laughing and jostling each other. The air inside felt trapped and stale. The boys tried not to gag. Their masks helped a little but there was still a stench of rotting meat mixed with a mouldy, mildewy smell. There was also a humming noise, as if there might be some machinery working somewhere nearby.

They stepped over the bodies of two soldiers, who looked like they were holding each other in their arms, and went up some stairs.

Ed was beginning to feel horribly faint and wobbly. He wanted to check the stadium out and then get the hell away from here as quickly as possible. He knew that dead bodies carried all sorts of diseases, like cholera and dysentery. Whenever there had been a natural disaster – and there seemed to have been loads before the big one, the sickness – earthquakes or hurricanes or terrible flooding, the news bulletins always went on about it – the risk of disease from unburied bodies. Well, there must have been thirty or forty of them outside, not

counting the ones in the trucks. The thought of all those germs …

This was a place of death.

They climbed the stairs, trying the doors on every level, until they reached the top and at last found a way out into the stands. Bam was first through. He took a couple of steps and stopped.

Ed heard him say two words.

'Holy cow …'

Jack and Ed followed Bam out into the sunlight. He was standing there, frozen to the spot, too stunned to say anything.

They were way up in a high-tech modern stand, a gleaming white construction of steel and concrete and glass. And below them was the vast expanse of the cricket pitch, every part of it filled with dead bodies. They were stacked in great mounds like a giant rubbish tip. The ones at the bottom were the most decomposed. If it wasn't for their bright clothing and the bones sticking out here and there, they wouldn't have been recognizable as human at all. The ones at the top were the freshest, though even they had been eaten away by disease and decay.

There were several earth-moving vehicles standing idle. Diggers and bulldozers, JCBs, even a couple of cranes with scoops dangling from their gantries. One scoop still held a few bodies.

And there were more bodies in the stands, dumped in the rows of green plastic seats, sitting there, like dead spectators at the ultimate gladiator fight. How many dead? Five thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand? Looking out over the mounds of corpses it was impossible to tell.

The noise Ed had heard was flies, millions of them, swarming over the dead. They were not alone. Crows hopped about, rats crawled, seagulls flapped and screeched and squabbled with each other. Two dogs were digging into one of the piles of flesh to get at the bones.

'Treasure beyond our wildest dreams,' said Ed bitterly.

Jack and Bam said nothing.

Ed noticed several towers made out of logs and planks and scrap wood, like giant bonfires. They had large blue plastic canisters

strapped to them. There were more canisters fixed around the stands.

'This place is one giant funeral pyre,' he said. 'Looks like they were planning to burn the whole bloody lot. Or blow it sky high.'

'They had the right idea,' said Jack.

Ed leant over, pulled his mask down and threw up on to a seat. His head was spinning and throbbed with an intense cold ache.

'We've got to get out of here,' he groaned. 'This is hell.'

But as they turned to leave they heard the sound of heavy footsteps climbing the stairs.

Ed felt a wave of fear and panic. He didn't need to look to know what was happening.

The sickos were coming.

They were trapped now. They were going to die here. They were going to join this heap of human compost, forgotten, like bags of rubbish tossed out for the bin men.

Ed's mind was racing faster than his heart. He couldn't think straight. A tangle of images were tumbling in his mind like the wheeling knot of seagulls over the corpse pile. Images of death and decay. But one thought kept poking through, beating all the others back, and he clung on to it.

He didn't want to die. It was as simple as that. He would do anything to stay alive.

The thought was terribly strong and clear.

He wanted to see the summer.

'We need to find another way out,' he said. 'There are sickos coming up the stairs.'

'You don't know that.'

'Then who is it, Jack? The undead police come to help us?'

Before Jack could say anything in reply the first of the sickos appeared at the entrance to the stairs. Three fathers. Sniffing the air. Searching for their prey.

Jack raised his machine gun. Ed saw that it was trembling in his hands. 'We could shoot them?'

'You don't know how to work that bloody thing,' Ed snapped. 'We can outrun them, though.'

He looked around for an escape. There was an external staircase here leading to the lower seating levels. They charged down it, crashing into the metal sides as they rounded the corners, until they reached the bottom. They quickly took in their situation. The nearest exit was blocked by one of the ominous stacks of blue canisters. The boys realized that the best means of escape would be to get down on to the pitch where a narrow strip of open grass had been left around the side of the corpse piles. They started to climb over the seats, pushing past the bodies that had been dumped there.

As Ed was clambering over a middle-aged mother in a weird floral sun hat, however, she reached out a hand and tried to take hold of his jacket. He jumped back. The mother hauled herself up out of the seat and puckered her lips and dribbled at Ed, as if she was getting ready to kiss him. Ed shoved her away and she fell into the next seat, waking a hairless father who flailed at Ed with long dirty fingernails.

'They're not dead,' Ed yelled. 'They're not all dead!'

All around them sickos were rising from the seats and shuffling towards them, and now Ed saw that there were more live ones down on the pitch, moving along the narrow pathways that divided the mounds.

The boys vaulted over seats, knocking sickos out of their way, stepping on dead bodies, slipping in filth, doing whatever it took to get down. As they reached the bottom, two young mothers on the edge of the pitch made a lunge for them and Bam fired off both barrels of his shotgun, not taking any chances.

The mothers went down and Bam fumbled to reload his gun.

One barrel at a time, he told himself, jiggling the shells into the holes. Just fire one barrel at a time. Keep something back.

'There's a way out over there,' Ed shouted, pointing to an exit from the pitch over near the old stand. They sprinted towards it past a wall of decomposing flesh on one side and the live sickos in the stands on the other, who were all coming down towards the pitch, some walking, some crawling, the younger ones moving faster, others stumbling, barely able to move, and as they came they dislodged the ones that had given up, who fell out of their seats.

It was impossible to tell which were dead and which alive. They were all covered in sores and boils and soft rotten patches.

The boys thought they were home free, the exit was just metres away, but then something moved ahead of them, and a cascade of dead bodies tumbled down from one of the piles directly into their path.

They had no choice. They would have to climb over them.

They tried, but it was like wading through deep mud. The bodies were so soft they gave way beneath their feet and the boys found themselves treading in shredded skin and innards.

'Look out!' Ed shouted.

A large group of sickos had got on to the pitch and was approaching from behind.

Jack raised his machine gun, fiddled with it, tried the trigger.

Nothing.

The sickos moved nearer.

He thumbed off the safety catch.

Tried the trigger again.

Nothing.

He swore and shook the gun. Tried another catch.

He yelled as the gun suddenly jumped and jerked in his hands, seeming to fire itself, spraying bullets everywhere except at the advancing sickos. Jack let go of the trigger in fright, but one of the bullets must have struck a canister, for the next moment there was an almighty bang and flames leapt into the air along with an ugly mess of body parts and a horrible reddish-brown spray.

The boys, along with most of the sickos, were knocked off their feet. They went sprawling against the hoarding around the edge of the stands and smashed painfully into the wood and plastic. They landed in a pile of sticky wetness and Ed was insanely grateful for the mask that was still clamped to his face.

This really was hell.

It was raining rotten flesh. A fire had started. A clutch of sickos ran past them, clothed in flames. They crashed into another stack of canisters and there was a second explosion.

The whole stadium seemed to be alight now.

The boys seized their opportunity and stumbled, dazed and disorientated, towards the exit. The open gate was tantalizingly close. But they had to wade through body parts and unmentionable filth to get there.

'Come on!' Ed yelled, breaking away from the others. 'We can do it –'

The next thing he knew he was running in silence in mid-air. The ground beneath his feet seemed suddenly to rise up and then just disappear. At the same time the air contracted around him, squeezing the breath out of him, crushing his chest, popping his eardrums. He didn't hear a bang so much as feel it. There was a blinding brightness and a bottomless darkness at the same time. Up became down and inside became out. Slowly, slowly, slowly an avalanche of dead bodies collapsed on top of him and smoke billowed towards him in a grey mushroom cloud that grew and grew until he was embraced by sweet, soft, silent oblivion.

47

Frédérique was alone in the women's toilet at the museum. Only her hands showed any signs of life as they fiddled in her lap, twining and intertwining, her fingernails picking at the skin. A drip of moisture fell from her nose and she shivered. Inside, though, she felt hot, like she was cooking. Her insides were writhing and churning. Her stomach cramping. Her heart beating too fast. Every few minutes she gave a little dry cough that sent a spasm of pain through her lungs.

She was in one of the stalls, sitting on a toilet with the lid down. The kids in the museum didn't use the toilets any more. They had buckets for that, which they emptied outside. The water they had was too precious to waste flushing down the loo.

She had come here to be alone, away from the noise of the other kids. Their constant chatter was starting to hurt her ears. She knew she should be happy. The day had gone well. Justin had eventually managed to get the lorry back to the museum, and they'd stopped round the back near to some loading-bay doors. The boys at the museum had been ridiculously over-excited when they'd seen what Justin and DogNut and the girls had brought back for them. It had lifted the younger ones out of their state of hungry, depressed boredom, and they'd celebrated by having a proper lunch. Or as proper as you could get out of cold tins.

It was while they'd been eating lunch that Frédérique had started to feel unwell. The food tasted weird and smelt of rotting plants and cows and fields and compost and toilets. Even now, thinking about it, it was making her mouth fill with vinegary saliva, and bile was rising up her throat. She thought she might be sick. She could picture what she'd eaten, sitting in her belly, sending out roots and tendrils and

spores, living inside her …

Sitting there in the café, trying to eat, a headache had lodged behind her eyes that she couldn't shift, despite digging into the precious supply of painkillers she kept in her purse. The noise in the café, with all the kids talking at once, had slowly driven her mad.

She needed quiet. Only she couldn't find any quiet. Not even alone here in the toilets. There seemed to be a constant babble of voices inside her head, all shouting and arguing at the same time. Screaming sometimes. The pressure was awful. Just awful. Every now and then she put her head down between her knees and moaned softly, then the pressure would press down hard on her eyes and she got scared that they were going to fall out on to the toilet floor or simply explode.

She rubbed the back of her head, at the base of her skull, trying to massage the tension away. It didn't make any difference but she carried on anyway, rubbing and rubbing until her hand came away bloody.

If only Jack hadn't gone. She could talk to him. Jack would know what to do. She'd been frightened of him at first with that strange birthmark on his face. But not any more. He was the nicest of them all, the kindest.

So why had he gone? The bastard.

The sudden flare of rage burned itself out as quickly as it had come on.

Her stomach was gurgling. A boiling mess of acid bubbled up her throat, scalding it. She had eaten something bad. That was it. The food had been on the lorry for a long time, after all. The stuff in cans had sell-by dates months away, but even so …

The voices in her head erupted, yelling at her.

It's not the food – not the food – you know what it is – why won't you admit it – you coward – it's not the food – the kids – they're all bastards – Jack left you – nobody gives a shit …

'*Tais-toi!*'

She clamped her hands either side of her head and her fingers ran over a cluster of little bumps that were nestling behind her ears, like insect bites.

They hadn't been there before.

She stood up. All her muscles felt stiff and it hurt to move, but she forced herself to stand and walk out of the cubicle. The toilet was underground and she had brought a little candle down with her that she had left by the basins. It seemed suddenly very bright and Frédérique gave a cry and shielded her eyes. She staggered over to the row of mirrors, eyes pressed nearly shut, and looked at her reflection.

She didn't like what she saw.

She was thinner than ever. Her lips were cracked and dry, peeling. Her eyes and nose rimmed with red. She lifted her long hair to look at the side of her neck.

'*Oh, mon dieu, non …*'

48

Bam didn't know if his eyes were open or not. He was in a world of blackness. As far as he could work out the explosion had ripped through the ground and he'd ended up somewhere below the pitch. All he knew for sure was that he was sitting on a cold hard floor with his back against a wall. The air was thick with dust and his mouth full of grit. He was bruised and aching all over, but the pain was bearable, which was something. His legs hurt the most. He could wiggle his toes, though, so he assumed that nothing was broken.

He could cope with a few bumps and bruises. What he couldn't cope with was the complete darkness. Either the light had been blocked by falling rubble or the explosion had blinded him.

He had felt around with his hands when he had first regained consciousness. There was a dead body next to him. Long dead. It was cold and soft and putrid. He wanted to get away from it, but he was too scared, because there was something else moving about down here with him, snuffling and sniffing and searching in the dark. Every few seconds he could hear its feet scrape on the floor.

Bam was trying to keep utterly still and utterly quiet. It wasn't easy. He had to keep breathing. The dust in his mouth and nose made him want to sneeze. His left leg was at an awkward angle and he desperately wanted to move it. But he couldn't risk it. He was scared even to swallow in case it made a noise.

He still had the shotgun in his hand, which was something. As far as he could remember, he had reloaded it and cocked it before the cave-in, but he wasn't a hundred per cent sure. There was a strong chance that he might pull the trigger and there would be a small, pathetic click and nothing more. He couldn't check it. It would give

him away. He gripped the double triggers tightly. If the thing came too close he would pull them and hope for the best.

He had no choice.

The thing, whatever it was, a mother or a father, there was no way of telling in the dark, moved again. He heard the dry rasp of its feet.

They could smell you, couldn't they? That's what they did. They sniffed the air. And there was probably more than one of them down here. They'd find him and he wouldn't be able to fight back because he couldn't see them. He couldn't see anything. He could imagine them, though, a group of them slowly creeping towards him in the darkness, worm-eaten, puffy and insane. Closing in, step by step, leaving slippery trails of saliva on the floor.

There!

The scuff of a shoe.

It was definitely closer.

He could hear it breathing.

Bam was beginning to feel faint. He wasn't taking in enough oxygen. The darkness seemed to be closing in on him, shrinking around him, crushing him. He wanted to be out in the sunshine, in the fresh air, running up a sports field with a ball in his hands.

He wanted to see his enemy. In the daylight he was the bravest boy in the world. He would tackle players twice his size. He was Bam the tank.

Not down here, though, not in the dark, covered in filth, alone.

Another scuff. Closer still. Only feet away.

Where were his friends? What had happened to them? Had they died in the explosion? He wanted to cry out, to shout for help, but that would only bring the shambling thing in the dark nearer.

But where were they?

Where were his friends?

49

Jack, too, was in the dark, wandering lost and alone, moving as fast as he dared, desperately searching for Ed and Bam. His throat was hurting, raw, as if someone had scraped it with a wire brush. His vocal cords felt scalded and strangled. He'd tried to cry out but the dust and the pain and the tightness had prevented him from making anything more than a gurgling, choking sound.

His head was ringing. He thought he might have been deafened by the explosion. All he could make out above the whistling, whiny noise that filled his ears were dull muffled sounds that could have been inside his head.

He'd been terrified that something like this would happen. He hadn't wanted to be responsible for the others, hadn't wanted Bam and Ed to come along with him. He'd tried to get away from them all and now he *was* responsible. It was his fault they'd ended up down here. Wherever *here* was.

So now he had to find his friends, to rescue them.

It was up to him.

It wasn't easy. He was stumbling along, arms held out in front, groping at the blackness, feeling for any walls or obstructions, head tucked down, cringing away from anything it might bash against. And all the while his sore, gritty eyes flicked around in their sockets, searching for any clues as to where he was, and how he might ever get out of here.

Look!

Was he imagining it? No. It was real. A small chink of light. If he could just get to it he'd be able to find his bearings. He had to admit he was no use to anyone like this, blind and dumb and confused. But

if he could find a way out he could go back to help the others. One of those dead soldiers or policemen outside must have a torch on them. Providing there still *was* an outside. Who knew how much damage that last explosion had done? Maybe he was buried down here under tons of rubble and dead bodies …

Don't think about that.

The most important thing was to escape, and then sort himself out and go back to look for the others. Nothing could happen to Bam and Ed in the meantime, not down here in the dark.

He froze. Something had moved in front of him, shifted slightly. The tiny spot of light had flickered. There was something up ahead.

He stood as still as he could, straining to see anything in the pitch darkness, straining to hear anything. But there was only the throb and hiss of his own blood surging around his body.

He couldn't stay like this forever, though. He had to move.

Then a thought struck him. He couldn't see in the dark, but neither could the sickos. They would be just as lost as him. He forced a smile. What was the worst they could do?

He got ready to run towards that welcoming chink of light.

50

Thirty-four, thirty-three, thirty-two …

Bam was counting down from fifty in his head. When he got to one, he would do something. Fight back. Get up. Take control. The sicko was still there, he could tell.

Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen, fifteen …

Come on, you diseased bag of pus. Let me know where you are.

Move, damn you.

And then it did move. Suddenly it was coming straight for him. And coming fast.

Bam yelled in fright and pulled the trigger at the same time. Firing one barrel. There was a *whoomph!* and a bright flare as the charge in the cartridge exploded, sending shot spraying out towards his attacker. It was over almost before it had started. Like a camera flash going off. But it lasted long enough for Bam to see a body falling back, arms thrown wide, the white face splashed with red down one side, eyes wide in terror and surprise.

Jack's face.

51

The kids were playing in the atrium, the younger ones chasing each other around among the tanks and vehicles. Nobody could remember being this happy for weeks. Jordan Hordern had been to see them. He was impressed by the lorry and had officially invited the newcomers to stay and share in everything they had. He'd organized some of his boys into a team to bring a few of the cages inside. Justin had even worked out how to operate the lift at the back of the lorry that brought them down to the ground. There were too many to shift in one go and they'd had to leave half of them on the lorry securely locked away from any marauding sickos.

Brooke, Aleisha and Courtney sat on a bench watching the fun. Wiki, Jibber-jabber, Zohra, Froggie and a couple of Matt's younger acolytes were dashing about yelling and shrieking. Frédérique had even joined in. She'd been moody since lunch, but now she seemed almost hysterically happy, like she'd become a little kid again.

Froggie ran over.

'Save me!' he shouted, and Aleisha jumped up. She was hardly taller than Froggie, but she wrapped her arms round him protectively.

'I'll save you!' she said. 'Just pretend I'm your mum!'

Froggie pressed his face into her body. 'Can I?' he asked quietly.

Aleisha smiled and kissed the top of his head. 'Course you can, little man.'

Brooke jeered at her friend. 'Look at you, being mum again. What's with you, girl?'

'She's nice,' said Froggie.

'She's *too* nice,' said Brooke. 'It ain't right.'

'What game you playing, anyway?' Aleisha asked.

‘Zombies!’ said Froggie.

‘You are joking me! Zombies?’ Aleisha shook her head, laughing in disbelief.

‘They’re doing the right thing,’ said Brooke. ‘You go for it, Froglet. Show them sickos we ain’t scared of them.’

‘Ain’t we?’ said Aleisha.

‘No we ain’t,’ said Brooke. ‘We done it. We went out there and we merked them good! We won them. We wasn’t just sitting around biting our nails and going “Deary me, whatever can we do, we’re all going to die.” We fighting back, yeah? That’s what we gonna do from now on, fight back.’

‘You said it, girl.’ Courtney bumped Brooke’s clenched fist, then turned to Aleisha. ‘They not so tough. By theyselves they rubbish, just weak and, like, stupid, yeah? But in big groups they way bad, they can, like, overdo you. No. What’s the word? Not, like, overdo. Over something? Overword? Overwell?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said Brooke. ‘What word?’

‘When you get, like, overwhelmed by something.’

‘That’s it! That’s the word.’

‘What?’

‘*Overwhelm*, you idiot.’

‘Oh yeah, I said it. *Overwhelm!*’

The three of them laughed. It felt so good. Whenever they laughed it felt as if heavy weights were being lifted from their backs.

Aleisha let Froggie go and he ran off. Aleisha watched him for a while then a cloud passed over her face and she grew serious.

‘Are we alone?’ she asked, sitting down.

Brooke looked at her.

‘How d’you mean *alone*?’

‘I mean – is this it? *Us* here. Are we, like, all that’s left?’

‘I don’t know. Can’t answer that.’

‘Is only because we haven’t met no other kids since we got here. And we didn’t see none out on the streets today, did we?’

‘Don’t mean there ain’t none out there,’ said Brooke. ‘I reckon there must be loads more kids around. Somewhere. Hiding. All in they own little groups. I’ll bet you there’s an identical group of kids to us going through all the same things as we are, having their own adventures, living, dying, finding food … laughing.’

‘Farting,’ said Courtney.

‘I’m serious, Courtney. We ain’t alone.’

‘And I’m serious too.’ Courtney gave an evil grin and then the others smelt it. They jumped up from the bench and backed away, holding their noses and cursing Courtney.

Frédérique ran past, her long hair flying. Eyes and mouth wide.

She was chasing Zohra, who was screaming happily. Frédérique screamed too, copying the younger girl, forcing out a long, thin, impossibly high note that seemed to fill the whole atrium. It was the only way she could shut out the other sounds the kids were making. The loud breathing, hearts beating, blood flowing through veins, food being digested, the thoughts yammering inside their heads. So many voices. Drone, drone, drone, gibbering on about nothing.

It wasn't just her hearing that was better; all her senses had been boosted. She could smell so much more, feel so much more, see so much more. Things were so bright it hurt her eyes, blinding her. The light burrowed into her head. She could feel it as it came in through her eye then down the optic nerve straight into her brain. Like someone was shining a torch into her mind, lighting it up.

Everything was very clear now. Clear and sharp and glowing and bright. She understood so many things she hadn't known before. The light had unlocked all this hidden stuff, sent her brain spinning. The others couldn't know that, the children. The stupid little children.

Because that's all they were. *Children.*

Stupid-stupid-stupid …

What did they know? Her brain was supercharged, like a sports car; they wouldn't understand that. They were wandering in the dark, like cave people. Their brains were solid and heavy and slow; hers was spinning so fast in her head it was getting hot.

She bit her knuckle, tasted blood. Like touching battery terminals with your tongue. A flash of electricity, metal, food, red, water, life.

She was changing. That was it. Evolving into a higher being. Like a caterpillar becoming a chrysalis becoming a butterfly. Her brain was turning to liquid and it would reform as something spectacular.

Yes.

She was becoming a super-being.

Not like these stupid-stupid-stupid … what was the word?

Enfants.

She laughed. Why had she been scared before? There was nothing to be afraid of. She was changing into something … magnificent.

Froggie and Wiki ran away from Frédérique and hid behind a tank.

Froggie was fighting to catch his breath.

'She's scary,' he gasped. 'I hope she doesn't catch me.'

'You're fast,' said Wiki. 'You can outrun her.'

'It feels really weird to be going crazy in a museum. You're never usually allowed to run around.'

'It's actually quite funny you should say that, about going crazy here,' said Wiki. 'You know what this place used to be? This building?'

'No,' said Froggie. 'What?'

‘Bedlam.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Its proper name was the Bethlem Royal Hospital. For mad people.’

‘A loony bin?’ said Froggie, his big eyes wide.

‘Yes. It was nicknamed Bedlam. It’s where the word comes from.’

‘What word?’ said Froggie.

‘Never mind.’

‘Is there anything you don’t know?’ Froggie asked.

‘There are lots of things I don’t know,’ said Wiki seriously.

‘What’s the weirdest thing you know?’

‘I know how to say “the toenails of my grandfather’s elder brother are stiff” in Indonesian.’

‘Yeah? Go on then.’

‘OK – *Kuku-kuku kaki kakak kakekku kaku kaku*.’

‘You made that up.’

‘No I didn’t. It’s true. “*Kuku-kuku kaki kakak kakekku kaku kaku*” means “the toenails of my grandfather’s elder brother are stiff” in Indonesian. Now look out! She’s coming!’

Frédérique could smell them. Hiding behind the tank. Oh, they were ripe. Fresh and ripe. Not like the muck she’d been forced to eat at lunch. That had been poisoned, she was sure of it now; the other children had tried to poison her – they’d never liked her. She was different in some way. And they knew it. She wasn’t one of them.

She was French.

They’d been hiding the good food. Keeping it for themselves. But she knew how to get at it. It was inside them.

The smell of them was making her salivate. Her mouth was full of liquid. It spilt over her lips. God, but she was hungry.

There they were, the two boys, two little piggies. She breathed in their stench, could already taste them. The smaller one, Froggie. He would be so tender. The soft flesh. The blood. Young and fresh and alive, electric, pulsing, pure, and full of red, red life …

She was gripped by a spasm that sent her whole body rigid. It felt like all her bones must break, snap under the strain. Electricity was running through her, power, fire, metal, red, food …

Zohra was watching Frédérique move in on Froggie and Wiki.

‘Get away!’ she shouted, glad it wasn’t her over there. Frédérique was too good at this game. She was making it too real. Froggie and Wiki were bumping into each other and yelling as they tried to dodge the tall girl’s grasping hands.

‘Run, Froggie!’ Zohra was laughing so much she thought she might be sick. The boys looked like something out of a speeded-up comedy film.

Then Frédérique howled and grabbed hold of Froggie's arm.

Froggie shrieked.

'She's caught me!'

Frédérique bared her teeth, brought Froggie's arm up to her mouth and bit down hard.

'Jack, Jack … I'm sorry, Jack.'

'You moron. You could have killed me.'

'But you're not dead. Thank God. How bad is it?'

'What do you think? You shot me, you moron.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you. I thought …'

'Well, it *was* me …'

'Jack, what have I done?'

'You *know* what you've done. You've shot me.'

'You're not dead, though. I didn't kill you.'

'It only got me down the side. I'm bleeding a bit. It's not too bad, I think. Doesn't hurt too much. It's lucky you're such a rotten shot.'

'I'm so sorry, Jack.'

'It's all right, Bam. It's not your fault. I know you didn't mean it, but I wish to God you hadn't done it.'

'I couldn't see. I thought you were a sicko.'

'Yeah, I know. I thought you were one too. There was a light, I saw a light, I think it must have been something reflecting off your gun barrel.'

'Jesus, Jack, I really thought I'd killed you.'

'Yeah, well, you didn't. Better luck next time.'

'Jack …'

'I'm still here, Bam. Just shut up about it. We've got to get out of here somehow.'

'Help!' Bam's voice boomed out in the darkness. 'Hello! Help … Ed! Are you there? Help us, Ed! Where are you? Ed …' Bam stopped shouting and the silence and the blackness felt deeper.

'Can you see anything?' Jack asked. 'Any light anywhere?'

‘No, Jack, but I can feel you … You’re soaked. It’s bad, Jack, it’s bad.’

‘I feel all right, Bam. It doesn’t hurt too much. I can stand up, I think.’

‘Come on then. I’ll help you.’

‘Ow … don’t hold me there, that hurts like bugger. Ow. OK. I’m OK. I’m OK. I’m up.’

‘Which way do we go? I can’t see anything.’

‘Oh, Jesus, Bam, I don’t think I can do this, put me down, put me down …’

Bam realized that Jack had been fronting it out before. The injury was bad and he was in a lot more pain than he’d been letting on. Tears came into Bam’s eyes. He wiped them away and stared into black nothingness. And then a strange thing happened: a patch of the black started to break up and fall apart, to be replaced by a bright square, that hung like a TV screen in the darkness.

He struggled to make sense of what he was seeing.

Light. A waft of smoke and dust. Then a silhouetted head and shoulders. A voice.

‘Bam?’

‘Ed? Is that you, Ed?’

A torch shone in and Bam shielded his eyes.

‘I heard you shouting.’ It was definitely Ed’s voice. ‘I’ve been looking everywhere. Come this way. I’ll pass you a torch. Is Jack hurt?’

‘Just a bit,’ said Jack sarcastically.

‘In the explosion?’

‘No,’ said Bam, coming over to the small opening and taking the torch off Ed. ‘I shot him. I thought he was a sicko.’

Ed swore. ‘We’ve got to get you out of there fast,’ he said. ‘See if you can pull down any more of this wall of rubble.’

With Bam working from one side and Ed from the other they set to, moving lumps of concrete until they’d made a big enough hole for Bam to be able to get out. Then Ed shone his torch in to guide Bam back to Jack. Bam saw that they’d fallen into some sort of underground sports hall. Part of the roof was caved in and there was a mound of dead bodies at the far end.

He went back over to Jack and swore again when he saw the state of him. His whole left-hand side was covered in bright red blood crusted with dirt. His shirt and jacket were ragged. He groaned as Bam hauled him to his feet and manhandled him to the opening. Ed helped them both out into the corridor on the other side. There was smoke everywhere, and the sound of flames. The structure of the building had been badly damaged. Big cracks zigzagged up the walls,

and chips of concrete and little rivulets of dust were falling everywhere.

Ed and Bam got under Jack's shoulders and the three of them blundered their way to a staircase that led up to ground level. Jack cursing. Bam fretting. Ed just glad they were all alive.

'I didn't fall through,' he explained as they made it out of the stand through some shattered glass doors. It was a relief to get out of the building, although the air outside wasn't much cleaner. 'The explosion threw me off the pitch into the stands,' Ed went on. 'I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I came round I figured you two must have got buried underground somewhere. I managed to get outside and find this torch in an ambulance. It's crazy, the whole place is on fire, but at least it's got rid of the sickos.'

'It's lucky you heard us shouting,' said Bam.

'Yeah, well, when I got back here I thought it was hopeless,' said Ed. 'I went down to the lower level and half the place was collapsed. Then I heard a shot. I couldn't believe it. When you started shouting I finally worked out where you were.'

They were skirting the stands, making their way to the main gates where they'd first come in. There was a creak and a rumble from the building.

'It's collapsing,' said Ed. 'We need to get well away from here, then we'll see how bad you are, Jack.'

'I'm fine,' Jack insisted. 'It's not as bad as it looks.'

'I hope so. Because it looks terrible.'

Swirls of black smoke carrying ashes and cinders billowed around the security vehicles and there was a sickening stink coming from the fire. Roasting flesh and blazing fat mixed with the bitter, choking stench of burning hair and bones, not to mention the smell of all the plastic and chemicals and building materials that were poisoning the atmosphere. Bam and Jack had lost their masks in the fall and Ed stopped just long enough to hand them fresh ones from his pack. Then they struggled on, half carrying, half dragging Jack between them. Ed had had to get rid of his rifle. It had been damaged in the explosion – the bayonet had snapped in half – and it was too awkward trying to carry it and Jack at the same time. Bam was limping badly. His legs were more badly hurt than he'd realized but at least he could walk. Jack grunted and complained as they jostled him along.

They headed to the main road and carried on south-east, towards Clapham. Behind them a vast column of smoke rose from the ruined Oval. Flames at the base of the column leapt and spurted skywards as if trying to escape. The roar was deafening and the surrounding buildings were already getting covered in a layer of soot and ash. The boys hadn't gone far when they heard the first of the vehicles explode.

‘Looks like we got out just in time,’ said Ed, glancing back at the devastation. ‘We need to keep moving.’

They walked a long way before Ed reckoned it was safe to stop and they broke into an office building. They thought it would be easier to fix Jack up in here than out on the street. There were no signs of any sickos. It was clean and dry and quiet. A black leather and chrome sofa stood in the reception area. They sat Jack down on it and Ed took off his backpack.

Jack looked awful. His skin was almost bone white, making his birthmark stand out even more vividly. His torn clothes were soaked with blood.

‘We need to take a proper look at you,’ said Ed.

‘It’s only on the surface, I think,’ said Jack. ‘It must be, otherwise why isn’t it hurting more?’

‘Whatever. You’re still losing a lot of blood.’

Ed opened Jack’s coat and put his fingers to his shirt buttons, but Jack stopped him, pushing his hand away.

‘Don’t, Ed,’ he said. ‘Just leave it. I’d rather not know.’

‘If you don’t want to look, fine. But we’ve got to at least bandage you, Jack.’

Jack thought about it, biting his lip. ‘All right,’ he said, turning his head away.

Ed unbuttoned Jack’s shirt and peeled it back.

‘Oh, crap, Jack. That does *not* look good.’

Jack’s left-hand side was peppered with red marks that ran from his chest down to his trousers. Some were merely bloody dents, but some were actual holes.

‘There’s probably still shot in there,’ said Bam, looking at the nasty punctures that dribbled blood down Jack’s pale skin. ‘If we don’t get that out, you’ll get infected, mate.’

‘*Can* we get it out?’ Jack asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Bam shrugged. ‘I don’t know, Jack. I don’t know how deep it is. I’m not a doctor.’

‘Then I’m buggered, basically.’

‘We should get you back to the museum,’ said Bam. ‘Someone there might know what to do.’

‘No,’ said Jack angrily. ‘How many times do I have to tell you I’m going home? Look, what’s this?’

Jack’s hand clutched at something that was hanging round his neck on an old leather bootlace.

‘It’s a key,’ said Bam.

‘Exactly,’ said Jack. ‘My front-door key, to be precise. I’ve kept it with me from the start. Because I always knew that one day I was going to go home and let myself into my own front door. I don’t know

why you two came along on this. All you've done is try and persuade me to go back. You'd do anything to stop me getting home, wouldn't you? Even shoot me!'

'It was an accident.'

'I know it was a bloody accident, Bam. I was making a joke.'

'Bam's right, though,' said Ed. 'I got some stuff off the ambulance, but you'd be better off back at the museum.'

'My house is nearer,' said Jack bluntly. 'And I don't feel like I can go very far like this. Clean the wounds, bandage me up and get me home. Anything you haven't got on you, I don't know, tweezers, scalpels, whatever you need, we can probably find there. And then we'll look at the damage properly. Deal?'

'All right, yes. We'll do that,' said Ed, unpacking his medical supplies. 'But you're a stubborn bastard, Jack.'

'Exactly. Too stubborn to die, that's me! Iron Jack, the armour-plated man.' He gave a little twisted smile, then closed his eyes before he started crying.

53

They'd been going for an hour. Along a very wide, very straight and very dreary road. They'd passed an endless parade of small shops and businesses. It had taken them twice as long as it should have. Jack was walking more and more slowly. He was bandaged and smothered in antiseptic, but blood was already soaking through the dressings in dark patches, and now, as the adrenalin wore off, every step hurt him. He'd taken some painkillers. They'd done little more than take the edge off and his mood was as black as the cloud of smoke that hung over south London. He knew that the chances of getting all the shot out cleanly were pretty slim. If it stayed inside him, the wounds wouldn't heal properly. It was hard enough trying to survive when you were fit and healthy, but like this …

He didn't want to think about it, but couldn't help himself. No matter where he steered it, his mind kept slipping back there. The bright flash, the stinging pain, the punch to his belly. The realization that everything had changed.

Ed and Bam tried hard to keep his spirits up, but it irritated him as much as it helped. Bam irritated him most. Jack knew he shouldn't blame him for what had happened. It was an accident. But, even so … If it just hadn't happened. If he could turn back time. If he could have called out to Bam. If Bam could have called out to him. If Bam had aimed another foot to the right. If, if, if …

He played the scene over and over in his head with different outcomes, but it didn't make any difference. The reality was that he was full of lead shot and losing a lot of blood. His hands and feet were freezing. He had pins and needles in his face. He was feeling faint and feeble and dizzy and thirsty. They had water with them and they

stopped every few metres so he could sip some more, but no matter how much he drank he wasn't able to shift his burning thirst.

They were getting into Clapham. He was nearly home, but if they were attacked again he wasn't sure he'd be able to do much.

Then he realized something else.

'My gun!' he said. 'Where's my gun? My lovely machine gun?'

'You must have lost it in the explosion,' said Ed.

'Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you get me another?'

'I did.'

'What?'

'When I went for the torch I got another pistol.'

'Not another machine gun?'

'Face it, Jack, you didn't really know how to use it, did you? You were more danger to us than anyone else.'

'I could have learnt, practised.'

'Yeah, and how many bullets would you have had left when you'd finished? Guns are all well and good but without ammo, they're useless. Pistols are easier to use and safer, and they don't use up their ammo so quickly. I found a few extra clips as well. It's all in my pack. When you're stronger, I'll give it you.'

'Give it to me now. Give me the gun.'

'It's too heavy, Jack. How would you carry it? You try and shove it in your waistband you'll kill yourself.'

'Yeah, all right …' Jack's voice softened. 'Thanks, Ed. You did really well back there. But that machine gun was so cool. All those weapons outside the Oval. All burned up. It's tragic.'

'You can have my shotgun if you want it, mate,' said Bam.

'I never want to see that bloody shotgun again as long as I live.'

'Sorry.'

'Stop saying sorry. It only makes things worse.'

'Sorry.'

'Oh bloody hell, Bam.'

They stopped for another sip of water and for Jack to catch his breath. Ed's back was stiff from propping him up under his shoulder.

'How much further now?' he asked. Since leaving the Oval they hadn't seen anyone else, and he was hoping their luck was going to hold out.

Jack sat down on a car's bonnet and looked around. They were by Clapham Common tube station; ahead of them lay the wide expanse of the common itself. A pack of dogs was running across it barking, but otherwise there were no signs of life.

'Only about five minutes,' Jack said. 'Maybe ten if we carry on at this speed. We're nearly there.'

They looked back the way they'd come. The column of smoke

from the Oval had gone miles up into the sky and had spread out to mix with the smoke from the other, larger, fire.

'London's burning, London's burning,' Jack sang quietly, and the others forced a laugh. It wasn't the funniest thing anyone had ever said, but it encouraged Ed that Jack could still try to make a joke. It gave him some small glimmer of hope that perhaps things weren't as bad as they seemed.

He was searching for something funny to say himself when he saw a movement in the distance.

Luckily Bam still had his binoculars firmly round his neck.

'Bam, take a look through your bins.' Ed pointed down the road. 'I think I saw someone moving about, just past the traffic lights.'

Bam put the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the area.

'No … Can't see anything. Oh, wait a minute. Yes, I think it's a man, just one, carrying something. But he's ducked out of sight. He's a long way away, though. I don't think we need worry about him if we keep moving.'

'You're sure there was just one of them?'

'Well, I only saw one, but that doesn't mean anything. They usually go around in groups, don't they? I mean, as I say, we need to get a budge on.'

They hoisted Jack on to his feet and turned back in the direction they were heading.

Jack spat out a harsh swear word, and sagged in their arms.

There were about fifteen sickos coming across the common towards them. They were mostly fathers, but there were three or four particularly raddled-looking mothers. They'd managed to get close while the boys were distracted.

Too close.

Bam and Ed quickly picked up Jack and staggered over to a side-road to try to get away.

'We can't outrun them,' Jack croaked. 'You'll kill me. Give me my gun, Ed.'

'We can't fight them all,' said Ed. 'Not with you like this.'

He looked back. The sickos were steadily gaining on them.

'Come on, Bam!' They tried to speed up, but it was no use. Jack cried out in pain.

'Stop! Stop! Just give me the gun.'

'It's in my pack.'

'Then give me yours. I'm too weak to use my sword.'

'Jack, you're too weak to do anything.'

'Give me the gun!'

'All right.'

They stopped and propped Jack against a car.

Ed ripped the pistol from the holster at his waist and gave it to Jack. Bam turned, raised his shotgun. He hadn't thought to reload it since shooting Jack at the Oval – he'd been too distracted – but he was fairly sure he still had one shell ready in the barrel. He took aim, squeezed the trigger and felt the gun kick against his aching shoulder.

The lead father fell back.

Jack was ready now. He pointed the pistol and fired. The gun sent a shockwave of pain down his arm as it jumped in his hand. The bullet completely missed its target.

Bam fumbled in his jacket pocket for more cartridges and discovered to his horror that the pocket was ripped and hanging half off. There was only one lone shell left.

Jack slid down the side of the car and sat with his back against it. This time he held the gun firmly with both hands and fired two shots in quick succession. The next sicko went down.

Bam broke his shotgun, slotted in his last shell and fired again. A third father fell.

Then he was out of shells and the sickos were on them.

Ed had backed away as the sickos advanced, so that he was behind Bam and Jack. He watched as a mother made a grab for Jack who feebly tried to bat her away with his pistol. Bam charged into the rest of them with a war cry, his shotgun reversed in his hands like a club. He whacked three sickos aside, barging into a fourth one and knocking her flat. He carried on past the group until he was well clear, then turned and came flying back, barrelling through the sickos like a mad bull.

Ed didn't know what to do. It had all happened so quickly. The sickos had come from nowhere. For a few seconds he stood there, unable to move. The mother who had gone for Jack had been joined by a father. They had hold of him and were dragging him away. He was too weak to resist.

Bam had gone down in a tangle of bodies and was trying to stand up with three sickos on his back.

Ed closed his eyes. And then it was as if something broke inside him, a wire that been twisted tighter and tighter and tighter had finally snapped. A weird calmness settled over him. An emptiness.

He opened his eyes.

'No.' He spoke softly, quietly. Then louder. 'No.'

Finally he screamed, 'No!' and ran at the two sickos who had Jack. He shoved the mother aside, kicked the father in the stomach and then punched him in the nose, splattering it across his diseased and pockmarked face. He kept moving and snatched up the fallen pistol before pulling Jack clear and dumping him behind a van for safety. He leant down, checked that Jack was conscious, then put the

pistol back into his hands and took hold of the handle of his sword.

'I need this,' he said, pulling it from its scabbard.

As he straightened up, he saw the father with the flattened nose coming right at him, arms raised. Ed slashed wildly at him and he went down in a spray of blood. One of the mothers was right behind. Again Ed chopped the sword through the air. The mother hissed and collapsed to her knees, clutching her bloody face.

Ed could hear a horrible screeching, keening sound, high and angry, like some huge hungry bird of prey attacking.

He realized he was making the sound. He had a blood lust on him, a killing frenzy. He was no longer thinking about what he was doing. He wasn't thinking about anything. He had become a mindless animal. Outside he was this yelling, screaming monster, and inside there was that weird calm, as if he had become two people, one acting, one watching.

And he somehow knew that he would never be the same again. The blade rose and fell, rose and fell, glinting as it cut through the air.

Almost in slow motion a father came at him and Ed plunged the sword into his belly. The flesh sucked at the blade, holding it hard, and as Ed tried to pull it free the father fell sideways and twisted it out of his grip.

Ed didn't stop; he ran to Bam and got hold of an attacking mother by the hair. He wrenched her head back so hard he felt something snap and carried on, kicking, gouging, snarling at the sickos, prising them loose one by one and tossing them aside. At last Bam was up, scratched and bloody but all right. Encouraged by Ed's efforts he was off again, charging the sickos and crunching into them.

Ed heard a gun shot. Jack was fending off another attack. The sickos had evidently singled him out as being the easiest target. Ed ran over just as a fat young mother got to him. He took her by the face, digging his fingers in. Her skin was thick with boils, and blood and pus ran down her neck as she twisted and writhed and thrashed about.

Jack shot at a father who was getting too close and Ed threw the mother hard against the van, knocking the fight out of her. Then he went back for the sword and at last managed to wrench it out of the dead father.

He turned, sword raised …

But it was all over.

There were only three sickos left now. Two big fathers and a teenager. They looked at the carnage and had enough sense to get away. As they hobbled off, Jack rolled out from behind the van and fired off another three shots, taking down the teenager.

Bam stood there, jeering at the fathers as they scarpered. He was exhausted, his clothes torn and spotted with blood, but there was a

look of crazy joy on his face.

'Yeah, you useless buggers!' he yelled. 'Get lost! You can't take us! We owned you. We're kings of the streets!'

Ed whooped and grinned at Bam who went into a Maori war dance.

'That was easy,' said Ed, drunk with happiness and relief.

Bam stopped dancing and rested his hands on his knees, laughing too much to carry on.

'Come and help me with Jack,' said Ed.

'OK.' Bam straightened up and as he did so another father stepped out from behind the hedge of somebody's front garden. Ed saw a flash as he swung his arm at the back of Bam's head.

Bam grunted and fell face down on the pavement with a horrible thud.

It was Greg.

He held a bloody meat cleaver in one hand and a large bundle under his arm. There were blisters on his face and his mouth was ringed with scarlet. There was a look of unthinking madness in his eyes.

He took a step towards Ed.

'Get out of the way!' Jack yelled, and Ed instinctively ducked to one side.

Jack aimed the pistol and pulled back hard on the trigger four times.

There were four pitiful clicks, like a child's cap gun, but nothing else.

'Ed?' Jack yelled. 'I need more bullets!'

'They're all in my bag,' Ed replied, but even as he said it he knew there wasn't time to get at them. Greg was walking fast towards him, legs wide, the meat cleaver swinging in long, vicious arcs.

Ed realized he still had the sword. He lunged at Greg but misjudged the distance. The tip of the blade raked across his chest, slitting open his jacket and shirt but doing little harm.

Greg didn't even pause. Just kept on coming.

He swiped wildly downwards and as Ed jumped back he felt the cleaver swish past his cheek.

He felt a sudden weird attack of dizziness. His cheek felt hot and there was a sharp pain, like a wasp sting. He put his hand to his face. It was drenched with blood and more blood was already pouring off his chin and on to his jacket.

Ed felt anger rise inside him, filling the emptiness. He moved in and lunged again. It was either luck, or some kind of dumb reaction, but Greg managed to bring his cleaver up just in time. The sword hit it with a clang that jarred Ed's arm. The blade shattered, but knocked

the cleaver to one side.

Ed didn't wait. He dropped the useless sword and ran at Greg. It was like running into a solid wall. Ed was winded. Somehow, though, he had got Greg's wrist and was holding the cleaver at bay. Greg didn't seem to want to drop whatever he was carrying under his other arm, so with his free hand Ed was able to go for his throat.

Up close Greg stank like a sewer. His body felt hot and damp. His breath came straight from an abattoir. He was breathing through his mouth, and pink-flecked saliva foamed at his lips.

He may have been sick but he was still stronger than Ed who was losing his grip on Greg's wrist.

Then Jack was with him, making a grab for the cleaver.

'No, Jack!' Ed yelled. 'You're hurt. I can do this.'

'It's all right,' said Jack.

Just then Greg's arm slipped out of Ed's hand and the cleaver came round. Jack gasped and fell back, but Greg was thrown off balance. Ed let go of his neck and slammed the heel of his palm into Greg's windpipe. Greg coughed and went limp, dropping his weapon. As he staggered backwards, taking tiny, dainty steps, Ed scrabbled to pick up the fallen cleaver.

His fingers closed around the slippery handle and he twisted round to face Greg.

He was standing there, fighting for breath, wide open, an easy target.

Ed didn't have to think twice. The killing rage was on him again. He moved in …

And then he saw what Greg was carrying under his arm, what had looked at first like the sort of pitiful bundle of rags that a street person would carry around.

Only it wasn't rags. It was a small dead body.

'Liam?' said Ed.

It was like a switch had been thrown in Greg's head. The madness was gone and for a moment he was human again. He looked down at the creased, purple face of his son and wailed in horror.

Then he looked at Ed, shook his head and ran off down the road towards the common.

Ed ran a few paces after him, then stopped. He wanted to follow him, to try to finish it, but he couldn't leave his friends. There might be other sickos around.

He went back. Jack was lying curled up into a ball, clutching his stomach. But, thank God, he was still alive. Ed knelt down and put a hand to him.

'Jack?'

'He cut me, Ed. He cut me open.'

‘I’ll get you home.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Jack grunted. ‘Too stubborn to die, remember? But how’s that big idiot, Bam? Is he OK? I want to tell him I don’t blame him. It wasn’t his fault.’

Ed went over to Bam. It was no good. It was all crap. There were no happy endings. Nobody watching over them. Only misery and struggle. And what for? Good people died as well as bad.

Greg’s cleaver had split open the back of Bam’s skull.

He was gone.

Ed sat down in the middle of the road and wept.

54

Jack was unconscious. He felt as heavy as two people, and Ed could hardly put one foot in front of the other as he staggered down the road with his friend on his shoulder. He'd figured the best thing would be to deal with Jack's wounds when they reached the relative safety of his house. It was too dangerous to stay out on the streets. It would be growing dark soon and then the sickos would emerge from their hiding places and go hunting for food. It had been fine at first. He'd managed to coax Jack back on to his feet, promising all the while that he would get him safely home, reassuring him, encouraging him, until eventually Jack had started walking.

He'd been reasonably cheerful when they set off. He was able to talk and, although clumsy and weak, he could at least hold himself upright, but he'd gradually become vague and confused and finally he'd slumped against Ed, his feet dragging along the road. Now Ed was just pulling him along. He'd tried slapping him and yelling at him like they did in films, but it didn't seem to do anything. Luckily Jack had given him pretty clear directions and an address before they'd set off again, but the journey seemed to be never-ending.

Ed was really scared.

Jack's clothes were stained black from the bleeding, and his wounds were starting to smell. Ed's hand around his ribs was slick with blood. He worried that holding him like this was tearing him open, but he had no choice.

If they were attacked now, he doubted he could do much to defend his friend. He'd reloaded his pistol and it dangled from his other hand, growing heavier with each step. He longed to shove it back in its holster, or even throw it aside, but he knew he had to keep

hold of it. It might be the only thing between him and a horrible death.

He came to a junction and checked the street names.

Thank God.

They were there at last. A typically English street of semi-detached houses with pointy roofs, white painted porches with balconies over the top, and once-neat little front gardens behind low stone walls.

'Come on, Jack,' he panted. 'Help me. You're nearly home. Just take a step, yeah?'

Now that the end was in sight Ed felt more exhausted than ever. This final leg was going to be the hardest. If only Jack would wake up and help him.

'Look, this is your street,' he said. 'That's your house up ahead … Come on, I'm not sure I can do this … Jack, walk, please walk, don't give up on me. They'll all be waiting for you. Your sisters, your mum and dad, they're all there. I can see them at the door, waving, calling to you, come on, Jack, do it for them.'

Something inside Jack's brain must have been functioning, because he groaned and Ed felt him stirring in his arms. Then his feet no longer dragged. They searched for a footing, took a step, then another. He was weak and uncoordinated but he was walking again.

Ed laughed and cried at the same time.

'That's it. Come on, Jack, that's it.' He looked at the house numbers as they passed. 67, 65, 63, 61 … Only another thirty to go. No, less, because this was the odd-numbered side of the street. Fifteen houses, fourteen …

He looked round at Jack. His eyes were open, rolling in his head, but he was struggling to focus. He recognized the street.

'You see,' said Ed. 'I told you I'd get you home. You can lie in your own bed again.'

49, 47, 45, 43 …

They were going unbearably slowly but they were still moving. Ed had all but forgotten his own wound, where Greg's cleaver had sliced his face open. There hadn't been time to do anything more than press a load of tissues against the cut. It was only when he put his hand up to wipe the sweat from his eyes that he felt the wad of paper still stuck there on the dried blood. As he tried to pull them away it sent a flash of pain through his head.

It was nothing, he told himself, compared to Jack's wounds.

35, 33, 31 …

They were there at last. Ed looked up at the house. The same as all the others. The cars parked outside in the road told him that this was an expensive street, though the houses weren't that big.

He dragged Jack up the front steps and let him flop down in the porch. He gently felt Jack's neck and took hold of the bootlace, then fished the key out. He lifted it over Jack's head and slipped the key into the lock. The door clicked open. It all felt so normal and familiar.

He put the key back over Jack's heart and then bent down to lift him up. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Jack wasn't helping and Ed was very nearly done for. His back felt like it was going to snap. Somehow, though, he managed to haul his friend up and in through the door, which he kicked shut behind him. It was dark inside without electricity and the windows covered in grime, but there was just enough light to show that the house hadn't been looted or trashed by anyone. It smelt stale and slightly rotten, but otherwise Ed might have simply been entering a locked-up house after a long holiday. His mum and dad had taken him to Australia for a month one Christmas to visit a cousin and when they'd got back the house had felt all stuffy and kind of dead.

He pushed past a bike in the hallway, dumped Jack on the sofa in the sitting room and took a quick look around. There were two photos on the mantelpiece of Jack and his family, one was just him and his sisters, the other was of the whole family, standing smartly dressed in a big garden, maybe at a wedding. There was Jack, looking shy and awkward. He'd never liked having his photo taken. And there were his mum and dad just as Ed remembered them from the couple of times they'd met. His father wearing glasses, a bit bald but with a nice open face and broad grin. His mum, small and thin, a little tired-looking, her smile slightly strained.

Both dead now probably.

And as for Jack's sisters? What was the chance that either of them would still be alive? Not his older sister. That was for sure. She would have been over fourteen when the disease broke out. Not necessarily dead, though, he supposed. Maybe just sick. Her pretty face covered in boils, her skin peeling …

Ed went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge: inside was a putrid mass of green mould and fungus. He went through all the kitchen cabinets. Apart from pots and pans and plates they were empty. Anything edible had long gone.

In a cupboard under the stairs, though, full of mops and brushes and a Hoover, he found a cardboard box hidden at the back, stuffed with cans.

Jack's folks must have stashed it away here. Ed pulled it out with a wild excited cry of triumph. Peaches, tomatoes, spaghetti hoops, frankfurters, meatballs, chick peas, broad beans. Ed realized he was actually drooling. He'd not had anything to eat since breakfast, and that hadn't been much to write home about. They'd left the lorry in

such a hurry none of them had thought to stock up on food.

He opened a can of peaches and drained the liquid greedily before stuffing some of the fruit into his mouth.

What was he thinking? This wasn't his food.

He raced in to tell Jack the good news. He found him at the mantelpiece, holding the family photograph, tears streaming down his face. Ed put an arm round him and hugged him, and Jack hugged him back.

'Why is this happening, Ed?'

'Don't think about that,' Ed whispered into his ear. 'I've found some food, mate.'

Jack feebly pushed him away, nodded, smiled. Ed slotted a peach slice between his lips, and Jack's whole face lit up like a little kid given ice cream. He worked his jaws, dripping juice and bits of peach down his front.

'I feel like someone in a cartoon,' he said. 'You know when they've been shot and they drink a glass of water and it all spurts out of little holes all over them.'

He tried to laugh, but it hurt him too much and Ed helped him back to the sofa.

'I need to look at you again,' he said. 'I need to sort out whatever Greg did to you and put some clean bandages on.'

'Where's Bam?'

Ed didn't know what to say, whether he should protect his friend. He felt numb and blank.

In the end he simply said, 'Bam's dead.'

Jack just said, 'Oh,' and closed his eyes. The conversation had worn him out and his brief rally was over.

Ed lifted his shirt, dreading what he would find. It was awful. Greg's cleaver had sliced through the original bandages just below Jack's ribs. It was impossible to tell how deep the wound was without prodding and probing and risking making it worse. Instead he set to with antiseptic and did what he could with the bandages, but he was no nurse.

When he was done, he gave Jack some water and some more peaches. It seemed to revive him a little and he summoned the strength to speak. Although it was only one word.

'Bedroom.'

'Come on then.'

Ed once again took Jack on his aching shoulder and they stumbled awkwardly across the room, back out into the hallway and over to the foot of the stairs.

'D'you think you can make it up?' Ed asked. Jack nodded and took hold of the banister.

Up they went, step by agonizing step, Jack growing weaker all the way. They made it eventually, though. How long had it taken? Half an hour? An hour? Ed had no real sense of time any more. It was still light outside, though, so it couldn't be that late.

When they reached the landing, Jack was almost passed out again and Ed had to look around for any clues as to which might be the door to his room. One of them had a 'KEEP OUT' sign on it with a skull and crossbones dripping blood. How old had Jack been when he'd put it there, he wondered. For it must surely be Jack's room. It wasn't the sort of sign girls put up. He must have been maybe ten, younger even. Parents liked to hang on to ancient things.

They groped their way along to the door and Ed pushed it open. A thin layer of dust covered everything but otherwise the room looked untouched.

There was a narrow single bed along one wall, with a dark blue duvet on it. Above the bed was an old poster for *Casino Royale*; one corner had come away and was hanging down, a flattened lump of Blu-Tack stuck to it. Ed lowered Jack on to the bed and without thinking pushed the corner of the poster back up so that it stuck to the wall.

He sat next to Jack and took in the rest of the room. It was a typical boy's bedroom. There was a little desk, and a bookshelf. Old books mostly. Jack had been away from home at boarding school for the last couple of years. There was Harry Potter, Alex Rider, Melvin Burgess, Robert Muchamore. A stack of comics sat on the floor, a 'Marvel Zombies' on the top. Ed recognized the Kev Walker cover. He'd read that one. Enjoyed it. On either side of the door were a poster of Lady Gaga and a framed print of a piece of Banksy graffiti – the two guys from *Pulp Fiction* with bananas instead of guns. There was another shelf of trophies near the window, for football and cricket and swimming, even one for trampolining. And there – Ed's heart snagged against his ribs – a photograph of the two of them, Jack and Ed, taken after the school team won a football tournament in Holland. Ed stood up and went over to take a closer look. He remembered when it had been taken so well. It was two years ago; they would both have been twelve. They looked so young, another lifetime. Ed had long hair back then. Jack looked happy and relaxed. The two of them stood with their arms round each other's shoulders, smiling straight at the camera, not a worry in the world.

As Ed was studying the photograph, he caught sight of a face reflected in the glass of the frame and he spun round in fright, thinking he'd seen the face of a sicko.

Idiot. Jumpy idiot. Not a sicko.

There was a wardrobe across the room with a mirror in the door.

He went to it, hardly daring to look.

No wonder he'd mistaken himself for a sicko.

The boy who stood looking back at him was in a right state. Covered in blood, his face pale and plastered with soot and ash. Most of the tissue paper had fallen off his cheek, but a few crusty black scraps remained, stuck to a long gash that was mostly scabbed over, but still bled in a couple of spots. His left eye was bruised and swollen shut. His right eye was ringed with dark purple.

The young fresh-faced boy in the photo might have been a different person.

He went back over to Jack, who was lying on his back, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. Already the duvet was darkening around him where his blood was soaking into it. He was shivering.

And then Ed remembered something.

There was a toy box in the corner. He lifted the lid and rifled through it. It was full of Lego, and old Action Men with no heads and arms. There were also bits of Bionicle and some half-painted Warhammer figures. Nearer the bottom were some plastic zoo animals. But no stuffed toys.

He closed the lid and looked around the room. A battered cardboard box sat on top of the wardrobe. He pulled it down, his shoulders screaming.

It was full of cuddly toys – a duck, a cow, three teddies, a snake – and there … a dog, with long floppy ears and a silly smile. One of the ears was worn away almost to nothing.

Floppy Dog.

He took it over to Jack and put it in his hands. Immediately Jack's fingers found the frayed ear and started to rub at it.

Ed lay down next to his friend and put his arm round him. Jack felt very cold and still.

'Are you awake?'

'Yes,' Jack whispered, barely making a sound.

'You're home, mate,' said Ed. 'In your own bed.'

'I know. It's good. There's nothing like your own bed, is there? It doesn't hurt any more, you know. I think I'm getting better.'

'Yeah.'

'When I was little … I wish I was little again …' Jack was finding it hard to speak. 'At primary school. Nothing seemed to matter then. Everything was easy. There was nothing to worry about. Except when I had to cram to do the entrance exams for Rowhurst, but even that … It seems, as you get older, there's just more and more to worry about. I wish I was at home with Mum.'

'You are home, Jack.'

'Oh yes …' Jack opened his eyes and looked at his old toy. 'Yay,

Floppy Dog,' he said, then closed his eyes again. 'Is it all over now, Ed? Is it safe?'

'Yeah. It's safe, mate. We'll be safe now. In the morning we'll get up and have some breakfast, then go down the shops – maybe they'll be open again. And then …'

'It's all right, Ed. You don't have to.'

'OK.'

'You know, Ed, I'm sorry I ever called you a coward. You're not a coward. You're brave. You're really brave. You got me home. You didn't leave me. You're my best friend, Ed.'

'And you're my best friend, Jack, you always will be.'

'Thanks.'

Neither of them said anything else. They didn't need to. There was nothing more to say. Ed watched the square of sky at the window as it faded to pink, then grey, then dark blue, then black. There was no moon tonight but the sky was splashed with millions of bright stars, more than Ed had ever seen before. He pictured himself flying up out of the little room, up on into the night sky, and then out into the solar system, past the planets and out into the endless reaches of space. The two of them lying here, alone in the empty house, didn't mean so much really, did they?

55

Brooke, Courtney and Aleisha lay squashed together on a couple of mattresses in the 1940s house. They could hear Froggie whimpering. Luckily Frédérique's teeth hadn't broken through the sleeve of his jumper and drawn blood, but he had a nasty purple bruise in the perfect shape of her jaws, as if he'd been bitten by a miniature shark, and he was really upset by the incident. It was the shock more than the pain that was making him cry now. For a little while they'd all felt safe. Happy. Not any more. They knew that an attack could come from anywhere at any time.

The girls couldn't get the image out of their minds, Frédérique, with her teeth clamped on the little boy's arm not letting go, her long hair falling about her face. The other kids milling about shrieking and yelling, nobody knowing what to do. In the end Jordan Hordern had rescued Froggie. He'd come down from the upper floor, calmly walked over to Frédérique and chopped her in the side of the neck with his hand.

DogNut and Jordan had then taken her limp body away.

'Is that gonna happen to the rest of us?' Aleisha asked, staring at the flickering night-light, glad of the warmth of her two friends on either side of her.

'Don't think about it,' said Brooke. 'Get some sleep.'

'I can't. Whenever I close my eyes, all I can, like, see is *her*, coming at me, like a witch, saying all this, like, French stuff, like *bonjour*, *mercy*, *Moulin Rouge* …'

'French is a stupid language,' said Courtney, 'and France is a dump.'

'Don't be scared of her,' said Brooke. 'She's locked up. She can't

hurt you now.'

'What if she gets out, comes creeping through the museum? I don't like it here.'

'I always found her creepy,' said Courtney. 'I never trusted her. I had, like, a what you call it, sick sense.'

'You was just *jealous*,' said Brooke.

'Wha-aat?'

'Yeah, because she's, like, thin, and you're, like, fat.'

'Bro-ooke!' said Aleisha, appalled. 'What you saying? You didn't ought to say things like that.'

'Yeah,' said Courtney. 'I ain't fat. I'm big.'

'Yeah, big and fat.' Brooke gave a snort of laughter. 'I don't know how you do it, girl, with what we get to eat. You're like that fat guy in *Lost*, Hurley. Crashes a plane on a, like, desert island, where there's no McDonald's or nothing, and doesn't get any thinner after, like, *weeks*.'

'I ain't fat, Brooke!'

Brooke laughed and leant over Aleisha to give Courtney a little squeeze.

'I don't love you any less because you're XL, girl. You are who you are. My mate. I don't care what you look like. I'm just saying you didn't like Lady Ooh-La-La because she's skinny. Ain't that right?'

'No,' said Courtney. 'I don't like Frédérique because she's a sicko who tried to eat Froggie.'

'Can we talk about something else?' said Aleisha. 'It's freaking me out. I don't feel safe no more. The sooner the boys get back the better.'

56

When Ed woke, there was light in the sky. For a long while he didn't move. His whole body was stiff and chilly, gripped by a knotted web of aches and pains. At last he gently untangled his arm out from under Jack's head and then very carefully closed his eyelids. Jack's skin was completely cold now, except for the strip along his side where Ed's body had been pressed against him.

'Goodbye, mate,' said Ed, but he had no more tears inside him.

At least Jack had died happy, at home, in his own bed, among his old familiar things. He looked very peaceful, lying there with his old dog for company.

Ed levered himself up off the mattress and stood on the carpet, trying to stretch some of the stiffness away. When he felt strong enough, he went down into the kitchen and looked out at the garden. The plants were shaking and bending in a strong wind. Shrubs and nettles and brambles and weeds were being tossed about as if some giant hand was stirring them.

It was morning, but still gloomy. The dark smoke cloud now filled most of the sky and there was the red glow of fire nearby. He could smell the smoke. It reminded him of when they'd broken into the church and found Mad Matt and the others passed out.

How long ago was that? It felt like weeks. But it wasn't, was it? It had only been three days.

He coughed. He would have to hurry. The fire was obviously blowing closer. There was a row of books on a dresser. He scanned the titles. They were cookbooks mostly but he was searching for something that you could be pretty sure of finding in every house in London. An *A to Z*.

There!

He pulled it out. It was filled with maps of all the streets in London. He looked up Jack's address and followed the route back to the War Museum with his finger. He checked it and rechecked it, memorizing street names. Once he was sure what he was doing he slipped the *A to Z* into his back pocket and then went over to one of the drawers he'd looked through last night and fished out a box of matches. Finally he grabbed a cookbook at random then went back upstairs.

He opened Jack's bedroom window and looked out into the road. The wind was blowing rubbish along but there was no sign of any people out and about. Before he'd finally fallen asleep last night he'd heard them, the sickos who came out after dark, wandering the streets, fighting, looking for food, but none had come near the house.

He tore a handful of pages from the cookbook, screwed them up and put them under Jack's bed. Then he packed in anything else he could find that would burn – more books, comics, teddies, clothes – and set light to it all with a couple of matches. In a few moments there was a blaze going and the room was filling with smoke.

'See you, Jack,' he said, tucked Floppy Dog into his friend's arms, kissed him on the forehead and went out.

He ran down the stairs, stuffed as much food as he could carry into his pack, shoved his pistol into its holster, grabbed the bike from the hallway, then opened the front door and went out into the street. He looked up at the house. Already Jack's bedroom was filled with flames and smoke was pouring out of the open window.

At least Jack wouldn't be found by any scavengers.

Ed turned away, got on the bike and started pedalling.

57

Frédérique was humming softly to herself. A familiar tune but she couldn't remember the name of it, or the words. Papa used to sing it to her when she was a little girl. She felt calmer now, out of the light. She was wrapped in darkness and it meant she could think clearly. The light punched your brain. It hurt. The darkness was kind and gentle, like …

She moaned and pushed her fingers through her hair. All across her scalp there were lumps and bumps. It was as if her brain was expanding, forcing these new growths out of her head. If she concentrated really hard as she ran her fingertips over them, she could read them like Braille, all the thoughts coming out of her head …

She would think of a way to escape from where they had trapped her. She would get away and she would punish them for what they had done to her.

The first thing she had to do was work out how to get her hands free of these things they'd clamped round them, these bracelets, these *menottes*.

She'd figure it out.

She was clever now.

Cleverer than them …

58

Ed couldn't get the reek of smoke out of his nostrils. It was everywhere, blown on a hot wind. It stung his eyes so that he wept as he cycled. He felt itchy under his skin. On edge. There was a weird, tense atmosphere to the day as if the world had been screwed up tight. Everything felt wrong. It was dark when it should have been light, so that it was somehow day and night at the same time.

The wind tugged at him, like an annoying child, making him jumpy. He had every reason to be nervous. The events of yesterday had really shaken him up and he'd lost two good friends.

His last friends.

It looked like today wasn't going to be any easier. The empty street he'd seen from Jack's window had given him a false hope. There were more sickos out on the streets than he'd ever seen before. They were everywhere, spooked by the approaching fire just as badly as he was. He expected any minute to be attacked again.

He had an awful feeling of hopeless doom he'd never known before. The dark sky seemed to press down on him with an awful heaviness. It was a lid, slowly closing, suffocating the world, trapping the smoke and the fire and wind. He was reminded of all those myths and legends where the sky was a solid thing that had to be held up. There was a giant, wasn't there, who lifted it on his shoulders?

Atlas. That was it. Atlas holding the sky up.

Well, it felt like Atlas had fallen.

He cycled as fast as he could, but it wasn't easy. The roads were blocked everywhere by abandoned vehicles, so that he had to keep swerving round them. It hadn't been so noticeable yesterday when they were walking, but riding a bike was different. You were aware of

every bump and hole and obstruction. Driving a car would have been nearly impossible.

In fact, every now and then he would come to a car that had been set on fire, and was reduced to a pile of twisted metal and plastic. There was other debris as well, strewn everywhere, rubbish and bins and dead bodies, occasionally a burnt-out run of buildings that had collapsed. He longed for an open stretch, but he had resigned himself to the fact that it wasn't going to happen.

He had already had to change the route he'd planned. The area around the Oval was an inferno. The flames had rapidly spread to the surrounding buildings so that there were now two big fires that threatened to link up and engulf the whole of south London. He had to stop every couple of minutes to check the *A to Z* and adjust his plans based on which roads he felt were safe to ride down.

The sickos didn't help either. There seemed to be gangs of them whichever way he went, standing in the road looking up at the sky, or just wandering aimlessly. Once he had to make a detour round a small group of them who were fighting like drunks, the sort of addled street people you used to see in the cities, arguing with each other and throwing clumsy punches.

He kept moving, though, and in his roundabout way he was getting gradually closer to the museum and safety. He just wished his heart wasn't beating so hard against his ribs and his breathing wasn't so quick and painful.

As he rode, images flashed through his mind, switching backwards and forwards. Jack and Bam, alive and laughing. Bam doing his Maori war dance. And then Bam lying in the gutter, cold and still, and Jack in his bed holding Floppy Dog. The living and the dead.

The dead.

All those bodies at the Oval. The red fountain of flesh rising over them when the first canister went off. He wondered how many other sites there were around London like that, stacked with corpses. He knew a lot of people had left the city when the disease had started killing people. He'd seen it on the news – traffic jams miles and miles long. Those were some of the last images they showed on television before it went off air. It had all happened so fast.

Ed tried to picture the rest of the world like this, falling into chaos and ruin. The numberless dead bodies everywhere. And, worse, the living. Zombies. Stranded between life and death. He remembered the sensation of being pressed up against Greg. The stink of him, the heat and the damp. The craziness in his eyes. Struggling over the meat cleaver …

And Greg was still out there somewhere.

With poor little Liam.

He told himself to just concentrate on the road and not dwell on anything else. But try as he might he couldn't get those images out of his head.

What was it about Greg?

There was something more. Something worse.

When Ed had looked into his eyes, seen the madness there, he'd recognized something and now he understood what it was. They were the same, the two of them; they'd both been helpless in the grip of a killing frenzy. When Ed had found his courage yesterday, he'd lost something precious in the bargain. He'd lost part of what made him human.

He was a different person now, and not a better one. Oh, yeah, he could fight, he could swat sickos like flies, he was a bloody hero, wasn't he? He was death himself. Riding a bike. But in the end all he was doing was adding to the score of the dead.

Was that all a hero was, then? A killing machine without a heart?

Stop it, Ed. Stop thinking. Keep pedalling, keep those wheels turning. Get back to the museum. See the others. His new friends.

That would help fight the sadness and blow away the darkness inside him that was spreading, suffocating him like the black clouds in the sky.

Jack lying there on the bed, cold and still with Floppy Dog in his arms.

Pedal. Just pedal. Those tears were caused by the smoke …

Concentrate on the living. Justin the truck-driving nerd and the little kids in his Brains Trust, mouthy Brooke and the girls, big Courtney and little Aleisha, strange Chris Marker with his face in a book, even Mad Matt and his acolytes. He missed them all.

And don't forget Jordan Hordern and DogNut and Frédérique …

God. Frédérique. What was he going to tell her? She really liked Jack. She'd come to rely on him. How could he break the news to her? She was most likely going to be tipped deeper into her own sadness.

Ed wasn't used to giving people bad news. Up until a few weeks ago there hadn't really *been* anything bad in his life. Bad news was something that adults had to deal with. Not kids. Oh, yeah, he'd had a mate whose mum had died in a road accident. He'd left school. But it hadn't really touched Ed. He'd soon forgotten about it. Now the sickness had forced them all to behave like adults. To take on adults' worries and responsibilities.

He stopped.

The way ahead was completely blocked.

He'd come to a railway bridge where there had been a train crash. Something had derailed an engine and it had tumbled off the bridge, dragging the lead carriages behind it and half demolishing the

structure. There was a pile of mangled metal and bricks in the road. Two cranes stood nearby next to several emergency vehicles and there were bodies under tarpaulins, a few more still on the train. They'd all just been left there. Abandoned.

No, not completely abandoned. Now that Ed looked closer he saw a bunch of sickos, squatting down, eating a corpse.

They hadn't spotted him yet, but he'd obviously have to go a different way. He checked his options and saw that more sickos were approaching from the direction he'd come. The only other route was along a side-road that branched off at a right angle, but that, too, was busy with people.

He had to get off the street. He made a quick decision and darted into the front garden of one of the houses that lined the road. He dumped his bike behind the hedge. Even if any of the sickos did find it they wouldn't know what to do with it. Keeping low, he checked out the building. Steps led up to the front door. If he went up them, though, he'd risk being seen. There was a wide bay window on the raised ground floor and beneath that a narrow basement window that overlooked a sort of shallow well below the level of the garden.

That would have to do.

He crawled over to it. It looked just big enough for him to fit through if he could get it open. He turned round, dropped on to his belly and kicked out a pane of glass, hoping the sickos wouldn't be attracted by the noise. Then he slithered down into the well, reached through the broken section and lifted the latch. In a few seconds he had swung the window up and was crawling through the opening feet first.

He lowered himself down until he was on solid ground, then quickly took up a position from where he could see out of the corner of the window.

Sickos were passing on the street. Luckily none of them made a detour into the front garden. He'd got away with it. All he had to do now was sit it out until the coast was clear.

He pulled his pistol out of its holster and rested against the wall, nose close to the glass. For the moment he was safe. He could rest, recharge his batteries that were being drained by the constant stress. He was so tired all the time.

He closed his eyes and let out his breath in a long sigh. Then froze. There was an answering sigh. Then the sound of movement behind him. He hadn't checked the room out properly when he'd climbed in backwards. It had been dark and he'd been concentrating on what was going on outside.

Slowly he turned round, hardly daring to look. There was just enough light from the broken window to show him that he was in a

large basement kitchen.

And it was filled with people.

They were lying on the floor, packed together, too many to count. Sickos. Hiding from the daylight. And they were starting to wake up, blinking in the gloom. The smell of smoke in the air had masked their stink, but now Ed became aware of it. A horrible toilet smell. And he could feel the heat coming off them. The one nearest to him belched and sat up, sniffing. He reached out towards Ed's leg and he kicked him away. That caused a commotion and soon a gaggle of them were struggling to their feet.

Ed thought about trying to climb back out of the window, but all the sickos around him were awake and clawing at his clothes now. They'd pull him down before he could get halfway.

To the right, about five metres away, there was a staircase leading up to the next floor. Ed shoved a tall pockmarked father aside and set off towards it. A mother stood up, barring his way, and without thinking Ed put the pistol to her chest and pulled the trigger. The bang startled all the other sickos in the room, and for a moment they stopped. Ed seized his chance and ran for it, barging through the few remaining adults who blocked his path.

He raced up the stairs and crashed through the door at the top into the hallway. He kept on moving until he reached the front door, then started fumbling with the various locks and chains that secured it. The sickos were evidently using some other way to get in and out of the house, but he didn't have time to look for it. He could hear them coming up the stairs, their feet thudding on the wooden steps, their arms brushing against the walls. The last lock didn't want to open, though, he obviously needed a key. He pulled at it and swore at it and battered the door violently.

'Come on!

It made no difference. He was stuck here.

He turned round and fired off a shot at the lead sicko, who tumbled backwards. And then he had an idea.

In how many films had he seen it done?

Did it really work?

He aimed his gun at the lock and pulled the trigger three times.

The hallway was instantly full of flying bits of metal and splintered wood. A piece took a chunk out of his neck, but he hardly felt it.

He tugged the handle, the remains of the lock fell away with a clatter and the door swung open.

To hell with what was out there – anything was better than being trapped inside with a bunch of them. He leapt down the front steps, holstered his pistol, grabbed the bike and charged out into the street.

There must have been twenty or thirty sickos, stretched right down the length of the road. They were a bad bunch, far gone, walking corpses, rotten and confused. But they were still a threat.

The side-road was about fifty metres away. If Ed was quick, he might just make it. The sickos weren't in a pack. They were mostly in ones and twos. There was a chance he could get round them.

He got back into the saddle and stood on the pedals, swerving round a couple of warty-looking mothers, then careered through the middle of another group. He ignored two ancient fathers with no hair or teeth, who flailed at him with stick-thin arms as he passed. The side-road was approaching fast. He leant into the curve and pedalled hard.

But as he turned the corner he saw nothing but more sickos, packed into this much narrower space. He skidded to a halt and thought about turning round. But the sickos from the main road were filtering down this way now. He was trapped.

If Ed had just carried on pedalling when he'd first rounded the corner, he might have been able to smash his way through the waiting sickos, but he'd waited too long now. They were bunching into a mob. There was nowhere to go in either direction.

He dismounted and drew his pistol. Maybe he could just blast his way through? He was using up a lot of his ammunition. He'd wanted to save his bullets for an emergency.

Hell, whichever way you looked at it, this *was* an emergency.

He fired, keeping his arm as straight and steady as he could. Then fired again. And again. All the while wheeling his bike forward. His aim wasn't brilliant. He clipped two of them, though, and the others stood there, not sure what to do. Not sure what was happening.

Ed carried on walking and firing, his bike acting as a shield to his left. How many bullets in a clip? Ten? Twenty? What would he do when he ran out?

He swore at the sickos.

Although he was moving, he was only really getting deeper and deeper into the heart of the mob. They were closing in behind him as he passed, waiting for their moment. For when the shooting stopped.

At last the gun clicked empty and Ed reckoned it was all over.

He swore again. Wished he had another weapon. Hated it to end like this.

And then he saw an extraordinary sight. A column of schoolboys wearing red blazers and carrying clubs, marching in step down the road, with packs on their backs. Like a unit off to fight in the Napoleonic Wars.

The column was two wide and maybe ten deep. The boy at their

head, with jet-black hair and chalk-white skin sprayed with freckles, was shouting orders. The boys stayed in formation, and as they reached the rear of the bunched-up sickos they started to lash out and hack their way through to Ed.

Using his bike as a battering ram, Ed forced his way towards them.

'This way!' called the boy at their head, pointing to a walkway between two rows of houses. Ed hurried, shoving sickos away to either side. When he got to them, the boys closed ranks round him, forming a protective wall. Then, still keeping their discipline, they backed away down the walkway, leaving the confused sickos behind.

The boys followed the walkway through a small housing estate, clubbing a few stray sickos as they went, and soon found their way on to a relatively clear street where they stopped to get their bearings.

Ed was so relieved and amazed and confused he didn't know what to say; in the end all he managed was a pathetic 'Thanks'.

'We heard gunshots,' said the boys' leader. 'And we know that Strangers can't use them.'

'Strangers?'

'That's what we call the people with the disease. I suppose everyone calls them something different.'

'Why Strangers?'

'We were always taught to be careful of strangers.'

'Stranger danger?' said Ed.

'Exactly.'

Ed looked at the boys who were standing staring at him in silence.

'Where the hell did you all come from, anyway?' he asked.

'We're from St Hilda's in Surrey,' said the leader.

'St Hilda's school?' Ed grinned, which sent a spasm of pain up his wounded cheek. 'I know St H. We used to play you lot at rugby. *And* football. I'm from Rowhurst.'

'Rowhurst? God, I know you buggers!' Another boy stepped forward, a big, keen-looking guy with fluffy hair, his shirt-collar turned up and sticking out of the top of his jumper.

'You're a Rowie, are you?' he went on. 'We came over in the autumn term. Good game too. You had a killer prop forward. Guy called Bam. Do you know him?'

'Of course!' Ed cried excitedly, and then a twinge of sadness got him and he bit his lip.

'What about Johnno?' said the St Hilda's boy. 'Piers?'

'I know them all,' said Ed quietly.

'Are they with you?'

'No,' said Ed. 'They *were*. They …'

A lump formed in his throat, stopping him from saying anything

else. The boy obviously got it, though, and didn't press Ed any further.

'Bad luck.' He stuck out his hand. 'I'm Pod, by the way. What's your name?'

'Ed Carter.'

'Pleased to meet you, Ed.'

'Ed Carter?' A boy with a big nose jostled to the front of the crowd. 'I know you. Andy Thomas,' he said, patting his chest. 'I remember you from the football team.'

'Yeah, hi,' said Ed, smiling at Andy, although in truth he couldn't remember him at all.

'You all right? That looks bad,' said Andy, pointing to Ed's cheek.

Ed shrugged. 'I think it *is* bad,' he said.

'So, are you just wandering the streets or do you have a safe place to go somewhere?' said the boys' leader.

'Safe place,' said Ed. 'I was trying to get there. The Imperial War Museum, actually.'

The leader looked interested.

'Could you take us there?'

'I could,' said Ed, 'but I'm not in charge. The guy who runs the place is … Well, he's not very welcoming. He's got a good set-up and he doesn't want to spoil it. He doesn't really want any newbies.'

'I'll deal with that when we get there,' said the boy confidently. 'I'm David, by the way, David King. I was head of the junior school at St Hilda's. Now, shall we get going?'

'Sure.' Ed dug out his *A to Z* and checked it quickly. The museum was much nearer than he'd realized.

They set off, Ed wheeling his bike at the head of the column with David. There were black smuts being blown on the wind now, which had grown even fiercer, and hotter. Ed had to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of it.

'Have you walked all the way from your school?' he asked.

'Yes. There were quite a lot more of us when we started.'

Ed looked around at the matching red blazers.

'You haven't picked anyone else up on the way?'

David smiled. 'Your chap who runs the museum,' he said, 'he's got the right idea. Look after your own. May I see your gun?'

'Sure.' Ed passed it to him.

'A gun is a very valuable thing,' said David, weighing it in his hand.

'You're telling me.'

Ed looked at David. He had a very serious, slightly snooty expression. It was quite funny in a way, on a boy his age, but Ed knew better than to laugh at him.

'I get it,' he said, a note of amusement in his voice. 'You weren't

trying to rescue me, you were trying to rescue the gun!'

'Something like that,' said David. 'But now you can help us at the War Museum, so it's worked out quite well all round, really, hasn't it? We can get you there safely and you can get us in.'

'I'll try,' said Ed. 'But there may be certain conditions.'

'I'm good at negotiating.' David sounded very sure of himself.

'Yeah?'

'Yes. I suppose, really, I should keep this as a reward for saving your life.'

David aimed the pistol at Ed. Ed smiled, not sure if David was being playful but giving him the benefit of the doubt.

'I went through a lot to get that gun.' Ed kept his voice flat and calm. 'So, I'm afraid I'm not going to give it up.' He gently took the gun back off David and put it in his holster. 'You can have this bike instead, though, if you want.'

'No thanks,' said David. 'I could have shot you then, you know?' he added.

'No you couldn't,' said Ed, forcing another smile though it badly hurt his face. 'It's not loaded.'

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‘You’ve got to come and see this.’ DogNut was standing at the main doors looking out at the open ground in front of the museum. ‘It’s the bloody red army.’

The boy who was on guard duty came over to join him and he laughed at what was going on outside.

David was marching up the pathway at the head of his column with Ed at his side. The St Hilda’s boys were keeping in perfect step and singing as they went.

The column marched right up to the doors, Ed’s bike bumping up the steps.

‘Hey!’ Ed called out. ‘Open up! It’s me.’

DogNut came out to meet him.

‘Where’d you pick this lot up, brother?’ he asked. ‘You got yourself an escort?’

‘I needed one.’

DogNut looked at Ed’s ruined face with a pained expression. ‘Yow,’ he said. ‘You want to get that seen to.’

‘Yeah, I will,’ said Ed, moving towards the doors. ‘Let’s go inside. I need to sit down.’

DogNut put up a hand.

‘You know Jordan’s rules,’ he said, and nodded towards David and the others. ‘They can’t come in.’

‘Oh, don’t be so silly,’ said David, and before DogNut could do anything he pushed past him and took his boys inside.

DogNut turned to Ed, looking panicked.

‘Ed!’

‘I’m not responsible for them, DogNut.’

‘You brought them here.’

‘Had no choice, really.’

‘Hold up.’ DogNut looked puzzled. ‘Where’s Jack and Bam? Ain’t they with you?’

Ed followed David inside. ‘No,’ he said bluntly over his shoulder as DogNut hurried after him.

‘What do you mean?’ said DogNut. ‘Where they at? They coming back?’

‘No,’ said Ed. ‘They’re not coming back.’

‘You mean they –’

‘DogNut!’ Ed snapped. ‘They’re dead, all right?’

‘Shit …’

Inside the museum it was chaos. David’s boys were milling around and Jordan’s guards were shouting at them.

‘Ed, you got to sort this out, man,’ said DogNut.

‘Not my problem.’

Kids were filtering out of the café to see what was going on. Brooke was among them. When she saw Ed, she broke out into a broad eager smile and trotted over to him. Halfway there, though, she caught sight of his wounds and stopped dead, one hand up to her mouth, her eyes wide.

‘Oh, Ed,’ she said into her fingers. ‘What have they done to you?’

Ed felt suddenly deflated. Everything that had happened in the last few days came tumbling down on top of him. What *had* they done to him? Tears came into his eyes. Someone pushed past. He ignored it. The angry shouting of the boys in the atrium sounded a million miles away. Through a film of tears he saw Brooke shaking her head, backing away, horrified. Before he could say anything, Jordan appeared at the head of the stairs.

‘Be quiet!’ he shouted, and miraculously everyone fell silent. All eyes turned as he came down, his long military coat rustling on the stone steps.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked, and David stepped out of the crowd.

‘I’m David King,’ he said. ‘We brought Ed Carter back for you.’

‘He doesn’t belong to me.’

‘He lives here, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re in charge, aren’t you?’

‘I am.’

‘Then he belongs to you.’ David was holding his hand out. ‘You must be Jordan Hordern,’ he said.

Jordan looked at David’s hand through his thick glasses, but didn’t make any attempt to shake it.

‘Thanks for helping Ed,’ said Jordan. ‘But I’m afraid you’re gonna

have to leave now. We haven't got enough food for you all.'

'I understand that,' said David. 'I would do the same in your position. But might I talk to you for a minute?'

'You might,' said Jordan, intrigued by David's strange, stiff, grown-up manner. 'Your boys can wait outside, though.'

'They'll wait inside, actually,' said David. 'I don't want them exposed to any danger. I've got them all the way here from Surrey. I'm *responsible* for them. They stay with me.' He was so firm, so sure of himself, that Jordan was taken aback. He looked round at the scattering of red blazers.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'But they stay here in the atrium. And no trouble. Whatever you and I agree on they don't argue about, OK?'

'They won't be any trouble. They'll do whatever I tell them.'

David shouted some orders and the boys began to take off their packs and find places to sit.

'You got 'em well drilled,' said Jordan as he led David back upstairs.

'Without discipline we would all be dead,' said David. 'Wasn't it the explorer Roald Amundsen who said "adventure is just bad planning"?'

'Was it?'

'I think it was.'

'You remind me a lot of me,' said Jordan. 'And that is not necessarily a good thing. There's not room here for two generals.'

'I appreciate that,' said David. 'But I'm sure we can come to some arrangement.'

Jordan laughed briefly. 'We'll see about that,' he said.

DogNut put a hand on Ed's shoulder.

'I'm sorry about Jack and Bam,' he said. 'They was good people.'

'Yeah,' said Ed. 'The best. We should never have gone. Just three of us.' He looked towards the café. Brooke had disappeared. 'Is everyone all right here?'

'Need to talk to you about that, blood.'

'What?' Ed looked at DogNut. He'd been assuming that the rest of the coach party were safe.

'It's the French girl,' said DogNut.

'Frédérique? What's happened to her?'

'You better come see for yourself. Don't sweat, everyone else is fine. Is just her.'

'Where is she? Is she hurt?'

'We had to lock her up in the Blitz Experience,' said DogNut, leading Ed to the back of the atrium. 'To keep it safe.'

The Blitz Experience was a mock-up of a wartime air-raid shelter

and part of a bombed-out London street. Ed had visited it once a couple of years ago. He remembered sound effects of planes going over and air-raid sirens and falling bombs and explosions, with radio announcements and cheesy recorded cockney voices taking you through it all. None of that would be working now. It would be dark and silent in there with no power for its lights and sounds.

DogNut fetched a candle and a rifle with a fixed bayonet and gave them to Ed, then, as they went down to the next level, he briefly explained what had happened.

'D'you want me to come in with you?' he asked as he unlocked the doors. 'Just in case?'

'I don't know.' Ed waited by the entrance. 'Is she dangerous?'

'She's locked up. Handcuffed to a chain. But don't get too close.'

'I'll see her alone.' Ed stepped through into the darkness. 'She knows me. She might be better with just one other person.'

'All right. Good luck, brother.' DogNut closed the door behind him.

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The way in was through the fake air-raid shelter, little more than a concrete box with benches down the sides and reproductions of old wartime propaganda posters. Ed walked to the far end and went through to the main exhibit. There was a ruined street here with views across a miniature London skyline towards a cut-out of St Paul's. He saw Frédérique at the far end by a bomb-damaged shop, sitting on an old wooden chair. She was hunched over, hugging herself, her arms tight over her stomach. She was bundled up in a big puffy jacket and a long skirt. A loop of chain snaked out from under her chair to an iron railing that was part of the set. There was a plate of untouched food next to her, a plastic bottle of water and a bucket that she hadn't used. Lying on the floor next to the plate was what looked like a small, half-eaten chicken leg.

'Frédérique …?'

As Ed approached her, she raised one hand to cover her eyes and gave a little gasp. Ed shielded the flame.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Is that better?'

'It's too bright,' said Frédérique.

Ed wondered whether to blow the candle out – it was clearly distressing her. Instead he took it to the far end of the exhibit and put it behind the flat frontage of the London skyline. The flickering light gave a feeble impression of the old flame effect they'd used to bring the blitzed cityscape alive. He left the rifle down here as well, so as not to frighten Frédérique.

As he made his way back to her she watched him intently with staring eyes, her pupils so wide they looked like great black holes in her head.

Ed sat down on a piece of scenery.

'Is that better?'

Frédérique sniffed the air. '*Oui*.'

Ed's eyes were slowly growing used to the dark. He could see that there was moisture glistening around Frédérique's nose and mouth and a run of spots in the shadow beneath her chin.

'How are you doing?' he asked gently.

'It is better in here.' Frédérique's voice sounded low and dull. 'Outside it was too bright. The sun was too hot. I couldn't think right. You know? In here it is more quiet. The voices in my head are asleep. Where is Jack?'

'He's … He's OK. He wanted to stay longer at his house.' Ed couldn't bear to tell her the truth. 'There were things he wanted to do,' he added lamely.

'I would like to see him. To talk to him.'

'You can talk to me.'

'All right.'

But Ed didn't know what to say to her. How to approach what had happened. And it was obvious what that was. He sat there for a long while just looking at her while she stared into the distance, hardly moving, leaning forward, folded in her arms.

In the end Ed realized there was no easy way to ask what he wanted to ask, so he just came straight out with it.

'Frédérique?'

'*Oui?*'

'How old are you?'

Frédérique sighed. She closed her eyes. Her head dropped so that she was curled into a ball on her seat.

'Fifteen,' she said quietly. 'Nearly sixteen.'

'Right …' Everything became very clear to Ed. It had been staring them in the face all along, but they'd misread all the signs. 'That's what you were scared of, wasn't it?' he said. 'Not the adults. The disease.'

'Yes. I thought that maybe when Greg was not sick there was some hope for me. But then … even he … I am very hungry, Ed.'

'There's food here. They've given you food.'

'I can't eat this. I need … Oh … I did not used to eat meat. Now … All I want … I don't know what I want … what I don't want.'

'I'm so sorry, Fred.'

'I'm going to die, aren't I?'

'Not necessarily, I mean, not everyone …'

Frédérique gave a short bitter laugh. 'No,' she said. 'You are right. Not everyone dies. You think that will be good, yes? To be like them. I have seen them. I don't want to be like them. They are … red.' Again

Frédérique sniffed.

'Red?'

'The word, I don't know, the English word … red … *rouge* … *sang* … Oh …'

Frédérique mumbled something in French that Ed didn't understand.

'How bad is it?' he asked.

Snot ran out of Frédérique's nose and she snorted it back in.

'I have a, what you call, *un mal de tête*?' she said.

'A headache?'

'Yes. And my stomach is bad. It is alive. My skin itch. I want to scratch all the time. Scratch-scratch. In the light I can't think. In here I am safe. But I don't know how long …'

She raised her head and looked at Ed with her wide black eyes, the whites tinged with pink. Her nostrils widened and she sucked in air through her nose. It bubbled and rattled in her throat.

She sighed, licked her dry lips, then pulled her long hair back from one ear.

'Look.'

Ed leant closer. There was a growth of ugly fat boils, full of pus. They clustered around her ear and inside it, blocking the hole. From there they ranged down her neck and under her chin, getting smaller as they went.

'That is not the worst,' she said. 'My body is the worst. Oh, Ed, I do not want to be sick. I do not want the red to have a baby.'

'Sorry? What? I don't get it.'

'I didn't mean to say that. I … I want to say … I don't know. I need to eat. But I am so dry. Do you have some water, please?'

'There's a bottle there,' said Ed. 'Do you want me to open it for you?'

'Thank you, you are very kind, a kind of *méchant*.'

'What's that?' Ed asked, picking up the bottle. 'Is that a French word?'

'I don't know. Why is it so dark?'

'You said the light hurts your eyes,' said Ed, unscrewing the lid.

'What?'

'You asked me why –'

'I didn't say anything.'

'Here. Drink some of this.' Ed kept his distance and stretched the bottle out towards her. Even from here he could smell a wet-dog stench coming off her.

She made no move to take the bottle and he shuffled closer. She was a pathetic figure. He felt sorry for her, not scared. Then he heard a drip and looked down to see that there was a puddle of blood

beneath her chair.

There was something wrong about this.

He looked at the bottle, the plate of food, the scrap of raw chicken on the floor. The skin white. Raw.

No. That didn't make sense.

Why would they give her raw chicken?

She wasn't an animal.

And *that* wasn't chicken.

He looked again.

It was a human thumb. With a bloody flap of skin around the base and the white stub of a broken bone sticking out.

Ed swallowed. His mouth was dry as dust.

Whose thumb was it?

It must be hers.

But why would she tear off her own thumb?

And then he got it. Too late. Frédérique was up out of her chair and coming at him, arms outstretched. The handcuffs dangling from one wrist, the other hand, the free hand, missing its thumb. There was blood all over her arms and down her front.

She came fast, and before Ed could react she got hold of his shirtfront and shoved him hard up against the wall with more force than he'd imagined she was capable of, winding him. He tried to pull away from her but she held him tight. His head was spinning. He was worn out from carrying Jack yesterday, and all his muscles ached. He didn't think he had the strength to fight her off. She bared her teeth. There was saliva bubbling between them. She put her face closer. The whites of her eyes were almost solid red. Thin trickles of blood came out of her tear ducts and ran down either side of her nose. Her jaws opened wide and she forced her mouth towards Ed. Her strength was appalling. Her breath stank like an animal house at the zoo. Ed was on the verge of fainting.

She stuck out her tongue and licked the length of Ed's scabby wound.

'No!' he yelled. 'Get off me!'

Somehow he managed to twist away and jab an elbow into Frédérique's side, knocking her over. She howled and came straight back at him on all fours. This time Ed knew she was going to bite him. He kicked her in the jaw and she fell back.

Ed just had time to get to the rifle and hold it out in front of him before Frédérique recovered. She squatted there, writhing and spitting.

'Frédérique, stop it!'

Then the poor girl doubled over in pain and started to retch, bringing up a sticky silvery stream of liquid that spattered on to the

fake cobblestones.

With that, the fight went out of her. She slumped down, pressed her face against the floor and started to weep.

'Kill me, Ed,' she pleaded. 'Please kill me. I cannot go on like this.'

'No, Fred, no … It's all right. You'll be all right …'

How many lies was he going to tell her today?

Just one more.

'Wait here,' he said. 'I'm going to get something that will help.'

'OK …'

Ed backed away from her and knocked on the door for DogNut to let him out.

62

Ed walked quickly into the centre of the atrium where the two rival gangs of boys were eyeing each other suspiciously.

'Right!' he shouted. 'Listen to me. I need you all to get your weapons and make two rows, leading from the stairs at the back to the front doors. Make a sort of passage, like, you know, running-the-gauntlet type of thing. I'm bringing someone through. She's sick, OK? But she's one of us, so I don't want anyone to hurt her. I just want to get her out of the building and away from here.'

'You sure you know what you doing, man?' DogNut had followed Ed up from the lower level, his small head bobbing on his skinny neck, agitated.

Ed took him into the front entrance area.

'We can't keep her locked up in there like an animal,' he said quietly and urgently. 'She'll only get worse. If I let her out, she can at least try and look after herself.'

'So you don't have to deal with her?'

'No. Maybe. Yeah.'

'But if you let her out, Ed …'

'She's a friend.'

'She's a sicko now,' said DogNut. 'That's the word you lot like to use, innit? *Sicko*. And sickos ain't our friends.'

'But *she* was …' said Ed. 'She *was* my friend. She'll just die in there.'

'True that.' DogNut pointed through the doors at the gardens. 'And out there she's free to attack any kid she wants.'

'So?' Ed shouted angrily. 'What do you want me to do? Shoot her? Stick my bayonet into her guts?'

‘I dunno …’

‘Well, neither do I. So I’m going to let her out. Open the doors. And be careful – she got out of the handcuffs.’

‘How the hell she do that?’

‘She bit her thumb off.’

‘Holy Jesus …’

DogNut didn’t argue any more. He opened the front doors and then formed the kids into a gauntlet as Ed went back for Frédérique.

The boys stood there in two long lines, each bristling with sticks and bayonets, swords and clubs. They waited, some laughing and making sharp remarks, others quiet and thoughtful, like kids organized into a game whose rules they didn’t really know.

After a while Frédérique emerged, blinking and confused, covering her eyes with her good hand, the cuffs rattling.

She flinched from the weapons as she shuffled between the lines. A group of Jordan’s boys sniggered at her, and a couple made crude comments. Then she brought up her injured hand and they shut up.

Ed followed, his rifle ready in case Frédérique tried to turn and run back.

She didn’t. She just kept slowly walking towards the main entrance. When she got there she halted. Cringing away from the sunlight, hunched over. Ed came up behind her.

‘You have to go,’ he said.

She turned and gulped at him. She looked so sad suddenly, so normal, just a frightened little girl. She shook her head.

Ed turned his rifle round and prodded her with the butt.

‘Please, Frédérique. Just go.’

There were blood-stained tears running down her cheeks. Her lower lip was trembling.

‘Ed,’ she said.

‘Just go!’ Ed snapped, and shoved her so that she went sprawling on to the front steps.

DogNut swung the doors shut.

Frédérique got up, came over to the glass and pawed at it. DogNut winced when he saw the ragged tear where her thumb had been. She was pleading in French and sobbing.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ed, and Frédérique threw herself at the window, slobbering against it, smearing it with filth. An animal again.

Ed didn’t want to see. He turned away and left her there, thumping and mewling and clawing at the glass. He couldn’t believe how quickly she’d got sick, how fast she’d changed, fallen apart.

Would it be worse now that she was outside in the light? Quicker? He didn’t know how the disease worked, but he’d seen enough to know that sunlight accelerated it.

He tried to shut her out of his mind. Walked away between the lines of silent boys.

DogNut stayed where he was. Not looking at the girl, but up, at the sky.

He felt a cold hard lump in his guts.

63

Jordan Hordern was sitting at his desk. He had taken over the director-general's office in the corner of the museum on the first floor. He had a bed against one wall and spent a lot of time in here reading and planning. The rest of his boys slept in the boardroom next door, which they'd turned into a dormitory. Both rooms looked out over the park and had good lines of sight.

David King was sitting opposite Jordan at the desk, his legs neatly crossed, listening as Jordan explained the rules. They were no different for David than they were for the coach party. If he and his boys could feed themselves, they were welcome to stay.

'We might not want to stay.'

'That's your decision.'

'You said yourself we can't have two people in charge,' David went on. 'I think I know best, and I don't want to be told what to do by anyone else.'

'Fair enough, soldier. Where were you heading anyway, before you found Ed?'

'Somewhere central. Somewhere with a good supply of food and water. Somewhere safe. Somewhere like this, really.'

'Yeah, well, I'm afraid we got here first.'

'Yes.'

'Why London, though?' Jordan asked. 'Wouldn't you have been better off in the countryside?'

'For the next few years we are going to be a scavenger society,' said David. 'Living off what the adults have left behind. This place, for instance, is full of weapons that we couldn't hope to make ourselves. Not until we learn the skills.'

‘True.’

‘So London is the obvious place to come. The countryside will be fine when it’s safer, when the Strangers have all died off, when we can learn how to grow our own food. But at the moment it’s pretty terrible out there. Funnily enough it’s quieter here in town.’

‘You’ll find somewhere else to hole up,’ said Jordan.

‘I doubt we’ll find somewhere else with as good a supply of weapons, though.’

‘OK,’ said Jordan. ‘That’s what this is all about, then? Weapons?’

‘You’ve surely got more than you can use.’

‘Not necessarily. Who knows how things are going to go? Who knows what we might need in the future?’

‘Twenty rifles,’ said David. ‘That’s all I’m asking for. Give me twenty rifles. You must have hundreds here.’

‘What about bullets?’ said Jordan.

‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘Most of these guns are useless. There’s no ammo for them. We did find some others in the armoury, and some bullets, but I ain’t Father Christmas.’

‘Well, then, if some of the guns aren’t any use to you,’ said David, ‘why not give them to us and let *us* worry about ammunition?’

‘If I give you guns, will you move on?’ Jordan asked, but David wasn’t listening. He had his head cocked to one side.

‘Can you hear that?’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Sounds like shouting.’

64

A huge argument was raging in the atrium. David's boys against Jordan's. It seemed that with their leaders not around both crews had lost all their discipline. There was a lot of childish name-calling going on. David's boys were from a privileged public school; Jordan's boys were mostly from the local estates. No one was quite sure what had started it, but there was now a fierce slanging match going on with both sides insulting the other in the crudest possible way.

David and Jordan came down the stairs shouting and trying to restore some sense of order. But the argument had been allowed to get out of hand and there was no easy way of stopping it. The two sides were acting like rival football teams who had got into a fight on the pitch and were using Jordan and David like referees. And the coach-party kids were acting as spectators, nudging each other and pointing, enjoying the spectacle.

It looked like there were going to be a few red cards today. The big rugby player, Pod, was particularly angry.

'You have to get them to apologize, David,' he kept saying, and David kept ignoring him.

In the end David lost his cool and snapped at him.

'Just shut up, Pod!' he shouted. 'All of you shut up.'

The noise died down a little.

'What have you two decided, anyway?' Pod asked. 'Although to tell you the truth I don't really want to stay here with this bunch of morons.'

'Loser,' someone shouted.

'We hadn't finished talking if you must know,' said David, sounding calmer.

‘Can’t they give us some guns and we’ll get going?’ said Pod.

‘Yeah, get lost!’ came a voice from the crowd.

‘There’s a lot to sort out,’ said David. ‘And you lot aren’t making it very easy for me. You’re behaving like a bunch of kids.’

‘David,’ said Andy, the guy with the big nose, ‘we *are* kids.’

‘I won’t have you fighting like this. I can sort things out, but I have to be able to leave you alone for five minutes without you fighting.’

‘They started it,’ said Pod.

‘We did not!’

‘It might not matter, anyways,’ said DogNut, coming in from the front entranceway. ‘You’d better come take a look at this.’

Ed, Jordan, David and DogNut were on the roof of the museum. The sky was almost completely covered by roiling black smoke, which was visibly spreading from the south-east, like ink staining a bowl of water. There was a roaring, crackling sound like a distant waterfall and they could see great flames leaping into the sky in the distance. The hot wind carried ash and cinders. Birds were flying past, and skinny moth-eaten dogs were appearing, trotting along the roads with their tails between their legs.

'The fire's driving them this way,' said David.

'Is getting serious,' said DogNut.

'We're in open ground here, aren't we?' Ed asked. 'I mean, the park goes all the way round, doesn't it?'

'Not at the back,' said Jordan. 'We're close to some other buildings there. If the fire gets really out of control, it could spread to the museum. I guess we could maybe try and fight it off somehow.'

'The thing is, though,' said David, 'if everything around you burned down, you wouldn't want to stay here, would you? It would be a wasteland.'

'At least there'd be no sickos left,' said Ed.

'There'd be nothing,' said David. 'You'd be stranded here.'

'We're not leaving,' said Jordan. 'We fought hard for this place.'

'But you said yourself it could catch fire,' said Ed.

'We'll take that risk.'

'For real?' DogNut was alarmed. 'I do not like fire, captain. I'm telling you, if them flames get too close, I am *out* of here.'

'DogNut's right,' said Ed. 'I saw what happened at the Oval. When a fire gets hot enough, it just burns everything.'

‘Maybe the wind will drop?’ said Jordan. ‘Change direction.’

This was the first time Ed had seen Jordan show any doubt, any hesitation.

‘I saw a programme about bush fires once,’ said David, staring at the sky. ‘In California and Australia. Whole towns just turned to ash and rubble. Cities rely on fire brigades. Without them fires can spread unchecked, and there’s nothing you can do to stop them. I’m taking my boys and I’m going. But first you’re going to give us some guns, Jordan. There’s no point in leaving them here to get burned.’

‘I’m with David,’ said Ed. ‘I’m going to at least get ready to pull out. You should too, Jordan. Pack everything up, put it on the lorry if you want.’

‘I can’t leave the museum.’

‘Bloody hell, Jordan. Look at that! The whole horizon’s covered with fire. You can always come back afterwards. See if the museum’s still standing. I’m not risking it, though. I’m going to start loading our food back on to the lorry. If it looks too hairy, we’ll head north, across the river. At least the Thames will stop the fire spreading any further. Honestly, Jordan, just let it burn itself out and come back when it’s all over.’

‘I’m not leaving.’

66

After the dogs came the children. A steady trickle of them, heading for the bridges. Boys and girls, bedraggled, exhausted, terrified. In small groups mostly, some riding bikes, some pushing shopping trolleys full of belongings, quite a few with suitcases on wheels, a handful packed into cars, driving slowly down the choked streets.

Jordan posted guards at all the entrances to the museum to stop anyone from trying to break in, but nobody wanted to stop. They'd seen the fire, they knew what it was capable of and just wanted to get well away.

Ed organized the coach party into a team and they grabbed all the food they'd carefully unloaded the day before and packed it back on to the lorry along with their sleeping bags and blankets. DogNut helped, and stayed outside with Ed making sure no passing kids nicked anything. Twice a small group of tough nuts made a detour and came over for a look, but when they saw the boys' weapons they carried on by, jeering and throwing things.

One group, though, three boys and a girl, stopped and asked for water. Ed gave them a bottle and asked them for details about the fire.

'We was hiding out in a tower block down Brixton,' said one of the boys. 'There was loads of us there. Last night the fire lit up the whole sky. This morning you could see it. We was up high and you could watch it jumping from building to building. There ain't nothing gonna stop it. You getting out?'

'Probably,' said Ed.

'Don't wait too long, man. It moves fast. It's a firestorm. If it gets close, you can't outrun it. We're getting over the river, take our chances on the north side, though I've always hated north London. It's

just that *now*, well there ain't hardly no south London left.'

'Honestly,' said the girl. 'Don't leave it too late. There's crazies back there. Thousands of them, being driven up this way by the fire. Every last one in south London most likely.'

Wiki and Jibber-jabber were arranging the food in the back of the lorry with Zohra and Froggie.

'Could we be burned?' said Froggie, his big bulging eyes wider than ever.

'Yes,' said Wiki.

'Will the whole of London be burned?'

'Probably not. The wind will drop, or it might rain, then there's the river that acts as a natural firebreak. But in the Great Fire of London in 1666 thirteen thousand houses went up in smoke. There were eighty thousand people living here then. About seventy thousand of them lost their homes. In 1906 in San Francisco twenty-five thousand buildings were destroyed by fire – admittedly there had been an earthquake as well, but even so.'

Ed came round to see how they were getting on. He had the rest of the coach party with him. There was Kwanele, wheeling his suitcase, immaculate in an admiral's uniform he'd found. Chris Marker followed, for once not reading a book. Justin the nerd was carrying a Sten gun for protection. It had no bullets in it but looked menacing enough and gave him a feeling of security. Then came Mad Matt and Archie and the acolytes, carrying their ridiculous banner. The scab on Matt's forehead was really gungy now but he displayed it proudly as a badge of honour. Bringing up the rear were Brooke, Courtney and Aleisha, quieter than normal, subdued and fearful.

Brooke nodded towards the kids that were streaming along the roads.

'See, Aleisha,' she said. 'We ain't alone. I told you.'

They all crowded nervously round, watching the skies. Ed shouted to get their attention.

'There's only twenty-three of us left.' Word had got round about Jack and Bam although it was clear Ed didn't want to talk about it. 'And we're not going to lose any more. OK? So this is how it is. The fire's spreading this way and spreading fast.'

'We're moving north,' said Matt, sounding very sure of himself. 'We were never meant to stay here. The Lamb has sent the fire.'

'Please, Matt …'

'We have to cross the river and go to the temple in the city, to St Paul's. Isn't it obvious?'

'No, it's not bloody obvious.' Ed was trying not to lose his temper. 'Why would we want to go to St Paul's? We'll decide where we're

going when we get across the river.'

'We should hurry,' said Froggie. 'I don't want to get burned up.'

'There's a few things I need to do before we leave,' said Ed.

'We're going to St Paul's,' Matt insisted.

'Shut up. Let me finish!' Ed glared at Matt until he was sure he wouldn't interrupt again, then went on. 'Kwanele, I want you to go and find Jordan, tell him if he wants to load anything on to here he'd better hurry, OK? Justin, I need to talk to you and Wiki about something inside. The rest of you stay with the lorry.'

'We need to rescue the books,' said Chris.

'What books?'

'There's a whole library of books up there. I'll need everyone to help me save the most useful.'

'We don't need books now, Chris.'

'Yes we do,' said Chris bluntly. 'If we want to survive we need knowledge. And books contain knowledge. Trust me. Books will save our lives just as much as weapons.'

'All right, all right. Brooke, you're in charge of helping Chris. The three of you, go with him, bring down what he wants and load them on to one of these empty cages. Just one, OK? Then get it on to the lorry. Don't argue with him. Don't take the piss. Just do it.'

'Sure thing, boss.'

'And be quick, it's getting late.'

'Right.'

'Who does that leave to guard the lorry?'

'We'll do it,' said Matt.

'You?'

'We're well armed.'

Indeed, Ed saw that Matt and his followers had got themselves some guns and were loaded down with knives and swords.

'All right,' said Ed, 'but don't get any stupid ideas about leaving without me.' He turned to Justin. 'Come with me. We need to talk.'

‘Frédérique’s gone. I guess you all know what happened to her?’

‘Yes,’ said Jibber-jabber.

Ed was in the museum shop with Justin and Wiki. Jibber-jabber had insisted on coming along as well. He and Wiki couldn’t be separated, and now he was off on one of his breathless monologues.

‘She got the sickness, she went nuts and tried to eat Froggie. You see, like, a wild cat? That’s what she looked like, it was really scary, not as scary as when Greg went psycho on the bus, but it wasn’t nice at all, she must have lied to us about her age.’

‘We never asked her,’ said Ed. ‘We just assumed.’

‘It explains a lot,’ said Justin.

‘Exactly. She’s nearly sixteen.’

‘What’s going to happen to her?’ asked Wiki.

‘God knows,’ said Ed. ‘She’s on her own now. She went for me while I was trying to talk to her. She seemed almost sort of normal at first. Why is it that when they get sick all they want to do is attack us?’

‘Is that what you wanted to talk to us about?’ said Justin.

‘Well, the main thing is …’ Ed paused, not sure if he should carry on.

‘What?’

‘OK. But you’ve got to promise not to tell anyone else.’

‘Fine.’

‘Next week’s my birthday,’ said Ed. ‘I’m going to be fifteen. What I’m asking is – am I going to get sick like Frédérique?’

The other three just sat there staring at him. Ed pressed on.

‘I mean – what happens to us as we get older? Are we all going to

become sickos?'

Still the others just sat there in silence.

'Come on,' said Ed. 'Say something.'

'We don't know, Ed,' said Justin. 'How can we know?'

'You must have some ideas.'

'Well …' Justin bit his lip. 'OK. If I had to say either way, I'd say it doesn't look too bad for you.'

'Why?'

'You have to look at the evidence,' said Wiki.

'Yeah, yeah, what evidence?'

'We've been talking about this in the Brains Trust,' said Justin. 'Sometimes when you talk about something it makes it less frightening. So we've been talking about why the sickos want to eat children.'

'Yeah, I can see how that might make Froggie a little less frightened,' said Ed sarcastically.

'It does, actually,' said Justin. 'If you can understand something, you can control it. Now, there's obviously something different between us and the sickos.'

'Yeah, just a bit,' said Jibber-jabber. 'They're nuts!'

'And we've thought about it in a Darwinian way,' Justin went on, ignoring Jibber-jabber.

'Get to the point,' said Ed. 'We haven't got long. What's a Darwinian way?'

'Survival of the fittest. Genetics, mating rituals, alpha males, queen bees, ant colonies, all the sort of stuff you get in a David Attenborough series.'

'What's that got to do with me being fifteen?'

'We're animals just the same as any other,' said Justin. 'And everything we do is to survive. Sickos as well.'

'Put it like this,' said Wiki. 'Whatever the sickos do – it's not random. So we have to assume that the sickos eat us in order to survive.'

'Oh, bloody hell, we know that!' Ed tried not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the conversation. Wiki and Justin being so serious and wannabe scientific. 'They need to eat something, so they try to eat us.'

'But why us?' said Justin. 'Why, out of all the available food sources, do the sickos choose us first? I mean, from what we can gather, if there's no children around they'll eat other things to survive – rats and cats and dead pigeons – any food they can find. Crisps even, I suppose, if they could get the packs open. But given the choice they'd *rather* eat children. Even though we fight back. Even though we kill them. Offer them a nice steak and chips and they're not interested,

they'll try to bite your hand off and eat that instead.'

'Yeah, OK. I get that.'

'Well,' said Justin, twining his fingers together like some crusty old school teacher. He was really enjoying this. 'In the wild, animals know what to eat and what not to eat. There's no food labelling, no sell-by dates, no nutritional advice or cookery programmes for them. They even eat some things as a sort of medicine.'

'You see my dog?' said Jibber-jabber. 'He used to eat grass to make himself sick, he'd chew away at it then cough it up, he used to look quite funny, but it was still disgusting.'

'Exactly,' said Justin. 'A lot of animals do things like that. They don't know why they do it, but they do. They have an impulse. Their bodies seem to know what they need even if their brains don't.'

'Are you saying that the sickos *need* to eat us, somehow?' Ed asked, getting interested now. 'To survive?'

'That would seem to be the most obvious answer,' said Justin. 'Let's look at the facts.' He counted on his fingers. 'One – as soon as anyone gets the disease, what's the first thing they do?'

'They attack.'

'Right. Two – why didn't Greg get ill as quickly as most other adults?'

'I don't know. Why? I've no idea.'

'Come on – what was he eating? That smoked meat.'

'Oh, yeah. And you reckon that was human meat?'

'Not just any human meat. Child meat.'

'OK. I get you, I think.' Ed smiled. 'Yeah. You're saying that if they eat us it helps to keep the sickness away? Is that it?'

'Maybe.' Justin stood up and started to walk up and down. 'Look at the most successful sickos. They're not so diseased, are they? So they can catch us kids easier. But maybe it's a chicken and egg thing? Maybe the two things are connected? The more kids they eat, the less sick they get, and the less sick they get the more kids they eat.'

'You're saying we're like a sort of medicine for them?'

'In a way, yes.'

'Bloody hell.' Ed rubbed his temples and slowly shook his head, trying to take this in.

'We think there's something in us that adults need to eat in order to stay alive,' said Wiki. 'That means that the reason we didn't get the sickness is that we're different to them. Biologically different somehow. Everybody born less than fifteen years ago has something inside them that prevents them from getting the disease.'

'What is it?'

'We've got no idea,' said Justin. 'But the sickos can sense it. Not consciously. I don't know, they can smell it, maybe. Remember what

happened to Frédérique when she was attacked at the lorry? The sickos weren't interested in her. They left her alone and went after the other kids. And that explains why they don't eat each other, well, not unless they're absolutely desperate. Their primary impulse is to attack and kill and eat children, because we are the *only* thing keeping them alive. Why do some die of the disease and some live? They live because they eat children. And the more they eat the longer they live.'

'That's not a very nice thought.'

'Yes, but like I said, all knowledge is power,' said Justin. 'The more we can understand them the more we can defend against them.'

'And what about sunlight, then?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why does sunlight make them worse?'

'Does it?' Justin was frowning. This was new information for him.

'Oh, come on, Justin,' said Ed, pathetically pleased that he knew something that Justin didn't. 'You must have seen it. When you put a dead sicko into the sun –'

'They turn into popcorn,' Jibber-jabber interrupted. 'Like exploding caterpillars.'

'Yes,' said Justin. 'Go on.'

'They prefer to stay in the dark,' said Ed. 'Not come out in the daylight. And Frédérique, she was all right in the dark, but went berserk in the daylight. When I spoke to her, she kept saying the sunlight hurt her.'

'Maybe there's something in the electromagnetic radiation from the sun,' said Wiki. 'Maybe the ultraviolet, or something. The sun's rays could accelerate the disease. There are people who are allergic to sunlight. They have to stay in the dark or their skin blisters. It's called polymorphous light eruption.'

'There's obviously a lot we still have to learn about the disease,' said Justin, sitting back down.

'Maybe you should catch some sickos and do experiments on them,' said Ed.

'Yes,' said Justin. 'It'd be dangerous, but if we really want to understand what's going on then we should.'

'Justin, I was joking!' said Ed. 'You can't start doing human experiments.'

'They're no longer human, Ed. We're the only humans left.'

'If you say so.' Ed sighed and started drumming his fingers on the table. 'But you haven't really answered my original question. Am I still going to be human after my birthday?'

'You say Frédérique tried to attack you.'

'She looked at me like I was lunch,' said Ed. 'Came at me with her mouth wide open.'

‘Then you must have inside you whatever prevents the disease.’

‘Yeah, but will it still be there when I get older?’

‘Logically I would say yes.’ Justin smiled at Ed. ‘You’re probably all right.’

‘Probably?’

‘It’s very hard to say anything definite in science,’ said Justin. ‘Probably’s the best we can offer.’

‘It’s better than nothing.’ Ed smiled back at Justin. ‘Thank God for the nerds of this world.’

‘But at the first sign of a cough or a cold,’ Justin added, ‘or a fever, or a rash, or spots of any kind, you get well away from me, OK? And stay away!’

Before Ed could reply there was a flash and a thud. The whole building shook and several windows cracked.

‘What the hell was that?’ said Jibber-jabber, jumping up.

‘An explosion of some sort, I reckon,’ said Justin. He pointed towards the broken windows. ‘Coming from that direction.’

‘The gasholders,’ said Ed. ‘I’ll bet it was the gasholders. That decides it. We’re getting out of here now.’

‘Looks like we ain’t going nowhere. I guess we gonna stay loyal to the general.’ DogNut made a gun of his fingers and fired two imaginary shots into the air. ‘Brap-brap!’

‘You’re staying?’

‘Yup.’

Ed shook his head. ‘You’re crazy.’

‘You know it, bruv!’

There was still a steady flow of bedraggled-looking kids tramping past the park, staring sullenly over at the museum. Ed and DogNut were standing at the back of the lorry. Justin had parked it on the grass to the side of the museum, ready to get away. The fire was obviously getting nearer. The sky was now filled with sparks and billowing smoke that burned their throats. The wind was so hot it was like opening an oven door.

Ed threw up his hands in despair. ‘This whole place is gonna go up,’ he said, raising his voice to be heard over the noise of the fire.

DogNut shrugged. ‘I dunno, bruv. Is all we got. We leave here, where we gonna go? What we gonna do? Maybe we need to make a stand. Get me?’

‘You can’t make a stand against fire.’

‘Jordan Hordern can. He’s one tough brother. Big boy on road.’

‘All right. Suit yourself. But we’re pulling out.’ Ed slapped him on the shoulder and walked towards the driver’s cab. ‘Good luck!’

‘Wait a minute!’ DogNut called him back. ‘The general gave me some gear for you. Thought you might find it useful.’ DogNut waved to a boy inside the museum and he came out of the side entrance wheeling a trolley piled high with weapons. Ed saw rifles, swords,

axes, clubs, bayonets … A proper arsenal.

He felt like weeping.

'Jordan Hordern's gone soft,' he said, picking out a rifle with a fixed bayonet. 'He's not as tough as he makes out, is he?'

'Don't worry,' said DogNut with a twisted grin. 'He ain't jazz. He kept all the best stuff for his-self.'

'What about David?'

DogNut sucked his teeth. 'He got his guns.'

Even as DogNut said it David and his boys emerged from the building and marched outside, proudly carrying their rifles on their shoulders. David shouted an order and they stopped to line up next to the lorry, trying to look all serious and military but breaking into childish grins as they checked each other out with their new toys.

David came over to Ed.

'We're willing to act as an escort,' he said. 'I think if we keep together we stand a better chance of making it across the river.'

'That's very good of you, David,' said Ed. 'What do you want in return?'

'Some of your food, obviously.'

Ed exchanged a look with DogNut. 'Fair enough,' he said. 'But will you be able to keep up with us?'

'Look at it,' said David. 'The roads are jammed. It was hard enough travelling on them before, but now it'll be nearly impossible. We can clear a way for you. You *really* don't want to get stuck, after all.'

'OK.' Ed looked along the line of red-blazered boys. 'You got bullets for those things, by the way?'

'A few.'

Ed walked back to the building with DogNut. 'Last chance, DogNut.' Ed put an arm over the skinny kid's shoulders. 'You sure you're not coming? We could use someone like you.'

'The DogNut is staying, blood. It's not like Jordan's forcing us, or nothing. Is our choice. We a team. We stay here. And we fight for what we got. Took a whole lot to win this place.'

'Say goodbye to him for me,' said Ed. 'And thanks.'

'Good luck, bro,' said DogNut. 'Come back and see us when the fire's gone out.'

Ed laughed, exchanged an awkward high five with DogNut and went back over to the lorry where the coach-party kids were waiting for him.

'Right,' he shouted. 'Justin up front. I'll ride with you. And Brooke?'

'Yeah? What?'

'You as well, in with me and Justin. The rest of you in the back.'

As Justin climbed up into the cab, Brooke took Ed aside.

'What you want me in the front with you for, then?'

Ed sighed. 'I know you all want me to be the leader and make all the difficult decisions,' he said, 'but I'm not sure I always know the best thing to do.'

'Yeah? So?'

'So you're the only other one round here who gets any respect from the others. From now on, you and me, Brooke, we're going to work together, OK?'

Brooke shrugged, flattered, but a little scared at the same time.

'OK.'

Ed had been turned away southwards, trying to work out how far away the fire was. Now he turned to look at Brooke.

'You ready, then?'

Brooke winced and shrank away from him. Not wanting to look at the gash down the side of his face, but ghoulishly fascinated at the same time.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I keep forgetting. I still ain't used to your, like, *cut*. It looks awful, Ed. You ain't even cleaned it properly or nothing. Couldn't you have got one of Jordan's crew to help you?'

Ed sighed and fingered the scab. His face hurt like hell and his eye was still swollen shut. He hoped it wasn't damaged.

'I haven't had time,' he said.

'Ed, you got to – you don't want it to go bad. You'll look like crap.'

Ed had been too busy before to think about his wound, and that was how he wanted it to stay, there was enough other stuff to worry about.

'What do you reckon they could do about it anyway?' he snapped. 'Stick a plaster on it and give me a paracetamol? Kiss it better?'

'You don't get that seen to, there ain't no one never gonna want to kiss you again, man,' Brooke muttered grumpily, annoyed by Ed's manner.

'I'll sort it out later,' said Ed. 'We've got to get going. It'll be dark soon, or at least it would be if it wasn't for the fire.'

'At least let me clean it,' said Brooke. 'You got, like, bog paper and stuff stuck to it. It looks well nasty.' Brooke reached out a hand towards Ed's face then snatched it away with a grimace.

'You look like one of them,' she said. 'You ain't turning into Frédérique, are you?'

'Just get on the lorry, Brooke, and let's get out of here.'

The lorry ploughed through the railings at the side of the park, flattening them, and the kids in the back cheered. As soon as they hit the road, however, they had to slow down. It was choked with fleeing children. The lorry rumbled forward at a snail's pace, David and his boys clearing a path, shoving aside kids to stop them from being run down, shifting piles of debris that were blocking the street, shunting away broken-down cars. It seemed that every few metres there was another obstacle in the road. Once they even had to move a collapsed advertising hoarding.

As they cleared a railway bridge, they finally came to a complete stop. There was yet another abandoned car in their way. David's boys fussed about as the lorry sat there shaking and hissing and Ed grew more and more frustrated. He hated being stuck in the claustrophobic cab not able to do anything except watch. Justin was sweating and swearing, teetering on the verge of panic. Brooke was moody and twitchy being separated from her friends. She kept sneaking disgusted glances at Ed's face. In the end Ed could stand it no longer. He kicked the door open and jumped down to help David's lot with the car.

Once the road was clear he decided to stay and walk with them for a while.

From down here the lorry looked huge as it moved slowly through the crowds. He was reminded of those old dinosaur films, where the dying dinosaurs have to escape some terrible natural disaster. There would be lots of small fast-moving dinosaurs, maybe even the odd early mammal or two, and there, in the middle of it all, a lumbering, hulking apatosaurus or the like.

It was taking too long. Behind them the fire was growing ever

closer, travelling faster than they were, steadily eating away at London. Ed could hear the roar and crackle of it and see unbelievably big flames clawing at the sky over the rooftops of the houses. There were distant screams, but it was impossible to tell, in all the confusion, which direction they were coming from.

At last, though, they reached the river, where the road opened out. Ahead of them was a large roundabout, and on the far side of it was Lambeth Bridge, flanked by two tall stone obelisks that were topped with what looked like pineapples. To the left was a modern glass and steel apartment block with curved walls, to the right, in sharp contrast, was what looked like a medieval church and beyond that the square redbrick Tudor buildings of Lambeth Palace. The church sat in its own gardens, which were filled with children waiting to cross the bridge.

A major road ran along the river here, and it, too, was packed. The sheer number of kids was causing a dangerous bottleneck and nobody seemed to be moving. Traffic was stuck on the bridge, and children were having to climb over cars or squeeze past them to get anywhere. It was chaos. There were dogs barking, horns blaring, boys and girls of all ages sitting in the road clutching their pathetic bundles of belongings. As more and more kids arrived they milled around, pushing and shoving each other.

'We'll never get over,' said one of David's boys, staring at the solid mass of people on the bridge.

'We have to,' said Ed. 'None of the other bridges will be any better. And we'd never get to them in time anyway.'

Somewhere off to the left there was an explosion. A fountain of vividly coloured sparks shot up into the air and a second later everyone felt the force of it as a shockwave passed through the crowd, starting a panic. There was a stampede, but with nowhere to go the mass of kids surged in all directions, knocking each other over and trampling smaller kids underfoot.

Ed tugged at his hair and bit the skin around his fingernails. Was this really happening? The black mood of despair settled over him again. He didn't have the energy to cope. He'd used up everything he had. He slipped his rifle off his shoulder, closed his eyes, slid slowly down one of the huge rear tyres of the lorry and sat on the tarmac. He put his hands over his ears to block out the sound of screaming.

They were all going to die here, on this stupid bloody road. And it was his fault. He should never have led the kids away from the safety of the museum.

The fire had reached the museum. Fanned by the strong winds it had torn through the houses at the rear and leapt up into a line of big trees at the edge of the park. Now, finally, one of the trees toppled over and crashed into the corner of the museum, ripping it open.

Smoke started to spread through the galleries.

Jordan was up in his office making plans with a small group of boys. DogNut was outside by the naval guns, watching the chaos and confusion. Smoke wafted in clumps across the park that was garishly lit up by the nearby fires.

DogNut was beginning to wish he'd gone with Ed and the others. The sheer power of the fire was terrifying. He'd never known anything like it. It was an unstoppable elemental force. Could they really hold out here?

He went back inside. Boys were sitting with their heads bowed, exhausted by the fear and stress. DogNut blinked. His friends looked vague and hazy, as if there was a veil hanging in the air between them. He looked up at the Spitfire dangling from the ceiling. It was lost in a grey fog.

DogNut swallowed. His throat hurt.

'Look at that.' One of the boys was pointing to the back of the atrium.

A long tendril of smoke was crawling across the floor. It looped around one of the tanks.

Then DogNut became aware of a hissing, shuffling sound. Like waves raking over small pebbles on a beach.

Was it fire making the sound, or something else?

Footsteps. Heavy breathing.

A father came shambling up the stairs, drool hanging from his lower lip. Behind him, other dark shapes were emerging from the smoke.

DogNut drew his katana from its sheath.

‘They’re in!’

'Get up!'

Ed tilted his head back and squinted at David. He was standing over him, clutching his rifle, a black shape against a fiery sky.

'Why?'

'Get up, Ed.'

'What's the point?'

David took hold of Ed's jacket and hauled him to his feet.

'You might want to sit here and get barbecued,' he said, 'but I don't. Everyone needs to do his bit. I've sent Pod and three others forward to try and find out what's happening on the bridge. The rest of my squad are guarding the lorry. We can't let anything happen to the cargo.'

Ed took a deep breath. 'Maybe we should just abandon it,' he said. 'If everyone got out and walked it'd be a lot easier to get across.'

'Is that really what you want to do?'

Ed sighed.

'No.' In truth he couldn't bear the thought of abandoning the lorry. It had their whole lives on it, as well as being a safe place for the kids. There was no getting away from the fact, though, that the conditions on the bridge were only going to get worse. More and more kids were arriving from every direction and filling the space around the roundabout, and the longer they sat here waiting for it to clear, the closer the fire was going to get. The wind was still blowing strongly in this direction. The smoke was so thick in the air it scoured Ed's eyes and throat so that he couldn't stop coughing.

David shoved him back against the side of the lorry and fixed him with a cold hard stare.

‘Are you just going to give up?’ he asked.

Ed shrugged. He just wanted to curl up under the lorry and go to sleep.

‘Is that what your friends would have wanted?’ David went on.

‘No.’

‘Then do it for them.’

David was right. What had it all been for? To have come through everything, to have fought so hard, for Jack and Bam and the others to die …

Ed wearily picked up his rifle.

‘I’ll fight,’ he said.

‘Good.’ David looked at his watch. ‘It’s gone six o’clock. We have to push on. What we haven’t considered is exactly what’s on the other side. The Strangers will all be coming out of their hiding places. The quicker we get to a place of safety the better.’

There was a shout and David turned to see Pod returning with his scouting party.

‘Some morons in cars have crashed,’ Pod explained when he arrived. ‘They’re arguing and fighting with each other. More cars have come up behind and tried to get past and they’re just making it worse. They’re blocking the whole bridge.’

‘We’ll have to clear it,’ said David.

‘How?’ Ed asked, amazed at David’s confidence.

David raised his own rifle. ‘We’ve got these, haven’t we?’

‘You can’t shoot everyone on the bridge.’

‘I’m not going to,’ said David, as if he was talking to a complete fool. ‘But it’ll give us some authority. Come on, Pod, bring everyone, we’re going to make a path for the lorry.’

David’s troops marched towards the bridge, David yelling at the milling kids to get out of the way. Miraculously they did. Ed went along to the cab and shouted at Justin to follow but now they were vulnerable to the hordes of angry kids who couldn’t go anywhere. They were tired and hungry and desperate. If they knew what was in the back of the lorry they could easily be tempted to attack.

As the lorry rolled slowly forward, Ed jumped up on to the footplate and leant in the driver’s window.

‘Don’t let the gap close,’ he told Justin. ‘David’s going to try and cut a way through. Keep your doors locked and your windows up. Brooke, you stay here with Justin. You’re in charge of the lorry now.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Stay out here and make sure nobody gets any bright ideas about jacking us.’

‘OK.’

Ed dropped down and pushed his way to the back of the lorry.

The shutter was rolled halfway up, the kids staring out at the crowds from among the cages.

'I need help,' he said, climbing up on to the tailgate. 'David's lot are going on ahead and I need more bodies down here protecting the lorry.'

At first nobody moved, then Matt and Archie Bishop and their acolytes clambered down, awkwardly carrying their banner. Courtney and Aleisha, looking scared but determined, came after them. Kwanele, Chris Marker and the younger kids made no move to follow.

Ed couldn't blame them. It was getting pretty intense out there.

'You two stay at the back here,' Ed said to Chris and Kwanele as he swung down into the road. 'Keep off anyone who tries to get in. We won't be far away.'

Chris nodded, his face white. Kwanele picked up a rifle with a fixed bayonet and came over to the opening. The weapon was shaking in his hands. He looked out. There was a field of faces looking up at him from the road behind the lorry and behind them there was a flickering red and orange glow above the buildings. Every few seconds a great shower of sparks would blossom up and spiral into the sky.

For a while it went OK. The lorry crept forward and Ed's small band patrolled the back and sides. So far nobody was bothering them; they were all too intent on trying to get over the bridge themselves. The people being barged out of the way at the front weren't too happy about it, but when they saw the rifles in David's boys' hands and the massive lorry rumbling and fuming up behind them they didn't argue.

Justin managed to get the lorry across the roundabout but as they approached the start of the bridge there was shouting from behind and the crowd surged forward. People were being knocked over in the panic and others were rushing to fill the gap David had cleared in front of the lorry. The crush of kids was soon going to be too great to let them move any further.

Ed thought at first that the fire must have got close, but when he looked up he could see no change. The flames still seemed to be a few streets away.

So what was spooking everyone?

He rounded up his little band.

'We need to see what's going on,' he said. The others nodded, though he could tell they weren't happy about going too far from the lorry.

'Stick together,' he said, and they fought their way back through the crowd towards the rear. It was impossible to see anything in the chaos and Ed was just about to give up when there was another stampede and a whole section of kids fell over almost as one, offering

a clear view all the way back to the line of buildings.

Aleisha was the only one to speak, but she summed up what everyone was thinking.

She simply said three words.

'Oh – my – God …'

Packed together in a featureless mass were hundreds of sickos. Limping and shuffling up the road, angry, confused and as desperate to get away from the approaching fire as the kids. This first wave was going to be the fittest, the least diseased, the most dangerous.

Behind them would come the ones who were nearly dead.

And behind them the flames.

Already the younger boys and girls in the road around them were screaming and climbing over each other as they tried to get away. Ed pulled a little girl to her feet and passed her to her friends to look after.

'We've got to stop them panicking,' he called out to his gang. 'We've got to hold the sickos back.'

He pushed through the crowd, grabbing anyone who carried a weapon of some kind, or who looked bigger or tougher or less afraid.

'Come with me!' he yelled at them. 'We have to hold them off. We can do it, come on!'

Most of the kids pulled away and swore at him or barged past towards the bridge, but a few understood what he was trying to do and joined him.

When they got to the edge of the crowd they could see the sickos more clearly. They were pouring in from every direction, some of them covered in blood, some of them blackened by soot. Their fear had turned them completely crazy. They snarled and bared their teeth and shook their arms.

Ed saw a girl who looked about ten running towards him. She tripped and was immediately swamped by sickos. An older boy went back to rescue her, and he too disappeared into the mass of bodies. Another group of kids turned to make a stand by the church gardens. They had no choice. There was nowhere for them to run to. But they were too few and only armed with sticks and broomhandles, which they thrashed vainly at the advancing tide. They didn't have a hope in hell of holding them back. In a minute they were going to be massacred.

Ed drew his pistol, fumbled with the safety catch and fired into the wall of rotting bodies. He had no idea if he hit anything but the noise was enough to draw everyone's attention to him, kids and adults alike.

For a second it was as if time froze. Ed stepped forward out of the ranks of children.

‘We have to fight them off!’ he bellowed, his voice hoarse. ‘All of us. Together. Turn round and stand your ground!’

He reholstered his gun. It would be a pointless waste of bullets to shoot anything else into that near-solid mass.

‘Anyone with a weapon come to me,’ he said, holding his rifle above his head with one hand.

‘The Lamb will protect you!’ Matt shouted, lifting his banner, and he, too, stepped clear of the crowd. Nobody had any idea what he was talking about or what the banner meant but it seemed to offer some sort of hope and kids began to rally round him.

Now they charged forward to reinforce the smaller group by the church garden. They managed to beat the first wave of sickos back and form a line. Ed found himself with Courtney and Aleisha on his left and a big square-headed boy armed with a garden fork on his right. The boy was swearing under his breath and grinding his teeth.

‘Come on, come on, you sick bastards, come and get it …’

After briefly dropping back the sickos came forward again. And they were soon close enough for Ed to pick out individuals. A mother with no lips; a teenager with a broken arm, the bones sticking through the skin; a fat father with bulging eyes whipping his head from side to side. And there …

Pez.

His lower jaw flapping at his chest.

Ed sensed the blood fever coming on again. He could feel that weird out-of-body calmness settling over him and, behind it, something wild and furious and out of control like a crazed beast rushing out of the darkness.

It was as if he was splitting into two people.

‘Take it to them!’

David was on the bridge with his boys, pushing steadily forward, the lorry inching along behind them. The crush of kids around them was getting worse and they were in danger of being totally overwhelmed. He was aware that something was going on to the rear – there had been shouts and screams, and then a gunshot. This had thrown the kids on the bridge into even more confusion and David was nearly knocked off his feet. The gunshot had given him an idea, though.

He fiddled with his rifle, pulled back the bolt and managed to shunt a bullet up out of the magazine into the chamber. They had all done CCF at school, the Combined Cadet Force, where they'd learnt the basics of being a soldier, including how to fire rifles. The old Lee-Enfield .303s they were carrying were similar to the .22s they'd trained with, but the reality of using rifles in some sort of combat situation was very different to the calm and ordered atmosphere of a rifle range.

The first thing was to get everyone's attention.

He aimed at the sky and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked, there was a loud bang and the bullet ripped up into the black smoke cloud that hung over the bridge.

'Get out of the way,' he shouted, aiming his rifle at the kids in front of him who had turned round to see what was going on. His boys also levelled their guns, some of which had fixed bayonets, and instantly a pathway cleared.

'Forward!' David commanded and his boys marched in formation, the lorry following.

They soon got as far as the stalled cars. There were two gangs of boys fighting around them, other kids shouting from the edges of the

scuffle, yet more crammed into the various stalled vehicles. By the side of the road a double-decker bus was on fire, adding to the chaos.

'Stop what you are doing and move these cars!' David barked. The boys barely looked at him. Some didn't even hear him, so once again he fired into the air.

Now they listened.

'Get these cars out of the way,' he said firmly, reloading the rifle. 'You're blocking the whole bridge.'

'Shove it up your arse,' said a stocky kid with a flat, blunt face. His friends laughed. David lowered his gun, aimed it at the boy's chest and fired.

The boy grunted and fell over backwards. Pod swore, not quite believing what had happened. Everyone else fell into a stunned silence.

David glared at the circle of kids that had formed round him.

'I said get these cars out of the way.'

Instantly everyone jumped to life, starting engines, releasing brakes, pushing stalled cars, shoving back the crowd. In a minute there was a clear path down the centre of the bridge and David marched on.

Sitting in the driver's cab Brooke was appalled. She looked down to where the stocky kid was being cradled by two crying girls. He wasn't moving, but whether he was dead or not it was impossible to tell.

'You can't do that,' she said. 'You can't go around shooting people.'

'He's cleared the bridge,' said Justin.

'Justin, he *shot* that boy. Just like that.'

'If we don't get everyone over the bridge,' said Justin, 'a lot more people are going to die.'

'Yeah, but … I mean, you can't just shoot people; it ain't right.'

'It's not right, no,' said Justin. 'But it's done.'

'You listen to me, Justin. Soon as we get across, soon as the road is clear, we got to get away from this nutter. You put your foot down, OK?'

'What about Ed?'

'We got to hope he's with us. I ain't getting out to look. I doubt we're the most popular people on this bridge right now.'

Ed stabbed his bayonet into the fat father and twisted. There was a splash of blood and a howl. He jerked the blade free, reversed the rifle and slammed the butt into a mother's face. He didn't stop now, but stabbed again, hacking into the sickos, splitting skulls, opening guts, hardly aware of what was going on. The square-headed boy was at his side, swearing with each jab of his fork, thrusting and grunting and

kicking. Courtney and Aleisha were also still with him, but he was somehow alone, lost in a world of redness, channelling all his frustration and terror through the rifle into his bayonet.

Pez stared through red sore eyes. Seeing little more than shapes. But he could smell them.

And he could taste them.

His belly hurt, burning with a cold fire. The only thing that would make the fire go away was to take the blood of one of the small ones. He was so hungry. He couldn't eat any more, though. He tried but he couldn't chew. His jaws wouldn't work.

He tilted back his head. Such a pain around his mouth. His tongue felt over his teeth like a feeding parasite looking for scraps of food. There was no food.

He howled in frustration. Why wouldn't his jaws work? He didn't know that they were unconnected, that his lower jaw hung uselessly down, the cheeks and tendons gone. All he knew was that he was hungry and he needed to kill.

Aleisha was terrified. This was way worse than yesterday. What was she doing here? She'd gone along with Courtney without really thinking. She'd wanted to be helpful and now here she was in the middle of a full-on freaking battle, surrounded by kids, yelling and screaming as they hit out with fists and feet, bits of wood and garden tools, sports equipment and the odd proper weapon. But the sickos just kept on coming. A mindless wall of them pushing forward, smelling like raw sewage.

She hung back behind Courtney and another big girl, poking her club at any sicko that got close. She might as well not have bothered. She was too small for this, not nearly strong enough and totally unused to fighting. Any minute now she was going to lose it big time.

She looked along the line. Ed was there, his rifle swinging through the air. He had cut himself a wide circle and looked like something out of one of her little brother's computer games, with the scar down his cheek and the gun in his hands and the blood all over him. He was wild-eyed and unhinged, grunting viciously as he hacked and stabbed at the sickos. The kids around him were keeping well away, obviously as scared of him as they were of the sickos. If she hadn't known him, she'd have been scared too.

The gap closed up and she lost sight of him. The sickos were advancing. She spotted Pez, wading through the ranks of the adults, spit running down his lower jaw and on to his chest.

And then the line of kids broke and the sickos surged forward.

As soon as Ed cut one sicko down, another took its place. It was like trying to empty an ocean with a bucket. He was plastered with blood and pus that stiffened as it dried. His arms ached from the wrists to the shoulders; the rifle felt as heavy as a telegraph pole. All around him the road was littered with bits of bodies and his feet kept slipping in puddles of blood. Wounded sickos crawled away or sat there stunned among the shapeless lumps of their dead companions.

The kids were completely boxed in now, crushed up against the front line of the sickos. They'd been reduced to just pushing and shoving in a great heaving mass of bodies. Ed stopped a beat too long and even he was swamped. One moment there was still room to swing his rifle, the next he was wrestling with a sweaty policeman who seemed to be trying to speak.

'Hold them,' Ed croaked. 'We've got to try and hold them!'

But then something gave way behind them. The crowd of waiting kids moved and Ed found himself staggering backwards. He stumbled over a corpse, got his footing back, and then tripped again as three mothers charged at him.

He went down heavily, jarring his spine. A knee got him in the face and for a moment he was dazed. He was in a tangle of legs, like when you fell over in a rugby scrum.

Another boy had fallen near him and was being dragged away by a group of fathers as he twisted and squirmed in their hands and tried to pull free.

There was another scuffle going on to his left. Sickos had got to a girl. He could only see her lower half. A young mother had hold of her club, another was tugging at her sleeves and the girl had nothing to

fight back with.

She was pulled to the ground and Ed realized to his horror that it was Aleisha. Even if he could get back on to his feet there were too many people between the two of them to get to her in time.

He watched helplessly as a teenage girl with long hair flapping in her face lunged down at Aleisha. Aleisha struggled, but the other girl took hold of her and sank her teeth into her forearm. Aleisha screamed and hit out at her attacker with her free hand. The long-haired teenager ignored the feeble blows and dragged Aleisha deeper into the ranks of the sickos.

Ed remembered his pistol. He forced himself into a kneeling position, wrenched the gun from its holster and aimed.

For a second the crush of bodies parted and he had a clear shot.

The girl with the long hair turned. Her hair whipped back and Ed could clearly see her face. She stared at Ed and suddenly the wildness drained out of her features.

It was Frédérique.

She frowned and smiled sadly at Ed. Then she held out her hands towards him like someone begging for money.

Ed pulled the trigger.

One moment Fred was there, the next she was gone.

And then Ed was knocked over again. His face hit the tarmac and he saw stars. Somehow he managed to wriggle on to his back, spitting and half blinded, only to find himself looking up into the gaping, dripping, wet face of Pez, his lower jaw swinging like a pendulum.

Ed tried to bring the gun round but he could barely move. His body seemed to be working in slow motion. Pez dropped on top of him, trapping his arm against his chest. The stink coming out of the red hole of his throat made Ed retch. He thought he was about to throw up. Pez pressed his mouth against Ed's face, but he couldn't bite. Ed felt his tongue slithering over his skin, saw his mad, pink eyes. Felt his fingers clawing at him.

He groaned.

And then there was a movement. Ed was dimly aware of someone plunging a weapon into the sicko. Pez flopped to the side, wriggled horribly, his feet drumming on the ground, and then fell still. Whoever had attacked him put a foot to the dead body.

It was the square-headed boy.

'Filthy bloody animal,' he said, pulling the tines of his fork out of Pez's chest. And then he reached down and hauled Ed to his feet.

Ed filled his burning lungs with oxygen and his head began to clear. He glanced around. Matt and his bunch were in the middle of the church gardens waving their banner. They appeared to be singing and chanting. Other kids were regrouping around them. Ed and the

boy with the fork cut their way over to them, picking up Courtney as they went. She had Aleisha with her, thank God. She looked terrible, though, bleeding badly and trembling, her face tight with shock.

When they got to the gardens, there was some degree of protection from the railings that surrounded them and Ed quickly took in their situation. There was progress on the bridge finally. Kids were pouring across it. The lorry was more than halfway over. But Ed's war party had become separated from the main group, and the way back to them was cut off by sickos.

To make matters worse, the fire had finally reached them and was rampaging through Lambeth Palace and the apartment block on either side of the road. It wouldn't be long before it reached the small church.

Ed had a strong urge to give up again, but then he realized the boy with the fork was grinning at him.

'This is fun, isn't it?' he said.

'Dunno about that.' Ed shook his head. 'But thanks for saving my arse. What's your name, by the way? I'm Ed.'

'Kyle,' said the boy.

'Well, Kyle.' Ed pointed towards the bridge. 'We're gonna have to get over there somehow, or we're gonna be stuck here.'

'OK.' Kyle's grin widened. 'I'm with you, mate.'

Ed smiled. Somehow the boy's insane enthusiasm had got to him. Maybe it wasn't impossible. The two of them formed the remaining kids into a tight unit, with the best fighters along the outer edge, ready to battle their way through the sickos.

'Make some noise!' Ed yelled when they were ready and then they charged out of the gardens, roaring a battle cry.

It was hopeless, though, a case of two steps forward, three steps back. There were just too damned many sickos blocking their way. Instead of moving towards the bridge the kids were being forced off to the right, on to the road that ran eastwards alongside the river. The bridge was getting further away. Ed looked for the lorry but couldn't see it any more. He hoped that the other kids at least were going to get to safety.

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Zohra was sitting at the back of the lorry pointing out at the London skyline.

'You see that, Froggie?' she said. 'What's that?'

Froggie leant over his sister and peered along the river.

His bulgy eyes opened wide.

There it was, silhouetted against the flame-bright sky, sparks exploding in the air behind it.

'The London Eye.'

'See?' said Zohra. 'Looks just like it does on the telly at New Year, doesn't it? With the fireworks and everything.'

'Yeah,' said Froggie, lost in the magic of it. 'It's amazing.'

'And there's the Houses of Parliament, with Big Ben and that.'

'Yeah.' Froggie smiled at his sister, his wide frog mouth stretching from ear to ear. She put her arm round him.

'We're gonna be all right, little frog,' she said.

Chris Marker sat with the cage of books he'd rescued from the museum, but for once he wasn't reading anything. He didn't know if it was caused by the fear and stress, the tiredness and hunger, but he was seeing things. Out of the corner of his eye: a grey shape that would dissolve if he tried to look at it straight on. He was sure it was the ghost from the museum, the Grey Lady. When he closed his eyes he could picture her clearly. Her skin was as grey as her old-fashioned clothes, but she didn't look diseased, instead she looked beautiful, as if lit by an inner light. There was a half smile on her lips.

She'd come with him, to look after her books. He felt comforted by her presence. He imagined that she was wrapping her arms around him, holding him and whispering in his ear.

Like a proper mother.

Not like that lot out there, the sicko mothers. And not like his own mother. She'd never been any use to him.

The Grey Lady was a ghost mother. The mother of all the writers of the books he'd saved. She would protect him.

As long as he protected the books.

Ed's group was surrounded on three sides now, with the Thames at their backs and the bridge to their right. They'd been forced off the road and on to the walkway that bordered the river. Ed was slashing and hacking at the enemy but there was nowhere for either side to go. They would have to fight till the last man standing. And it looked like the sickos were going to win. They were starting to get in among the kids, biting and scratching, and the kids were exhausted. He doubted they could hold out much longer. It was only a matter of time before they were overrun by the army of disease-ridden adults.

What was the point? What was the point of killing any more of them? Why carry on fighting? He'd done his duty. He'd saved the others and honoured the memory of his fallen friends. He'd shown David he wasn't a quitter. He'd stood his ground like a hero. And now he was going to die a hero's death, massacred by a much bigger force.

What was the point?

But somehow his rifle kept on moving, stabbing, battering, rising and falling, rising and falling, and somehow his legs kept from buckling. He had no idea what reserves of energy he was running on; he'd gone beyond tiredness. He was little better than a machine.

The sickos seemed far, far away and nothing mattered to him any more. He was shutting down his conscious mind and letting his body fight on without him.

And then he heard gunshots. Shouting. And a shudder passed through the ranks of the diseased.

'Someone's attacking them from the rear,' Kyle shouted. 'Come on! Let's show them who's boss!'

Ed came back alive, turned to his exhausted friends.

‘Don’t give up!’ he bellowed, tears in his eyes. ‘There’s help coming!’

He sensed a fresh fight along the line. In front of them the sickos were falling away, turning to the side, trying to get clear, trapped between Ed’s group and whoever was pressing them from behind.

A mob of sickos broke and stumbled away and now Ed could see …

It was Jordan Hordern and his crew from the museum. Well armed, well drilled and fresh. They moved mercilessly through the fleeing sickos. Chopping down anyone that got in their path.

At their head was Jordan himself, shouting orders, his sword flashing in his hand.

And there was DogNut, fighting just as hard with his katana.

Ed’s group gave a cheer and laid into the sickos that remained with savage fury. The two groups fought their way towards each other until at last they linked up.

Jordan saluted Ed.

‘What happened?’ Ed panted, ready to drop.

‘Couldn’t stay,’ was all Jordan replied. ‘What about you?’

‘We got separated from the others,’ Ed explained, looking towards the bridge. ‘We have to get over there.’

‘No chance,’ said Jordan flatly. ‘You lot are finished and there’s hundreds of the bastards between here and the bridge. Plus, the fire’s just about on us. We managed to stay a few metres ahead is all.’

‘Then what?’ said Ed, feeling his new hope slipping away.

‘There,’ said Jordan, nodding.

A small pier jutted out into the river, and a metal walkway ran down from it on to a mooring platform to which four sightseeing boats were tethered.

‘We could get across on one of those,’ said Jordan.

‘You reckon?’

‘Do we have any choice?’

‘Fall back!’ Ed bawled. ‘Get on to that pier!’

They fought their way to the café that stood at the end of the pier and then swarmed past it and out along the walkway.

The surface of the Thames was alive with reflected light. Vivid reds and oranges, golds and yellows made ever-changing patterns on the normally black water. Bits of rubbish and wreckage and the bodies of people and animals flowed past serenely on the current.

The kids kept moving, down the walkway and on to the platform from where they scrambled on to the nearest boat, a blue and white cruiser, with an enclosed lower deck and an open-sided upper deck.

Jordan made his way to the wheelhouse that stood up at the front. DogNut and one of his friends went round throwing off the mooring

ropes. Ed helped the other kids on board and checked that everyone was all right. As well as Jordan's crew there were about twenty others who'd fought alongside them. The casualties from his own gang weren't as bad as Ed had feared. Three of Matt's acolytes hadn't made it, the others were knocked about, but, though bruised, they had no serious cuts. Ed himself was painted with gore from head to foot – as far as he could tell, though, none of it was his.

Last to board were Courtney and Aleisha. Aleisha's arm was soaked with blood and she was in a lot of pain. Her dark skin looked grey and she looked smaller than ever, as if she had shrunk in on herself.

'Take her below,' said Ed. 'Sit her down and stay with her. When we get to the other side we'll catch up with the lorry and get some antiseptic and bandages and stuff.'

'The lorry,' said Aleisha, perking up for a moment. 'Did they make it?'

Ed smiled. 'They made it.'

'Woo-hoo.' Aleisha tried to shout it, but didn't have the strength.

'And we're going to make it too,' said Ed defiantly. 'We'll get your arm sorted out … Actually …'

Ed grabbed Kyle who was going past with his fork.

'Kyle,' he said. 'There must be a first-aid kit somewhere on board. See if you can find it and sort these two out.'

'Aye, aye, skipper!' Kyle saluted and blundered off along the rocking deck.

The sickos didn't try to get on to the boat and the kids on the boat laughed and jeered at them as DogNut came running over to Ed.

'There's only one rope left,' he said. 'Shall I let her go?'

Ed took a last look back. Lambeth Palace was now completely engulfed in flames that were spreading to some of the trees along the riverside. The noise was deafening and the whole sky to the south looked like something out of a war film.

The sickos were starting to cross Lambeth Bridge. The lorry was somewhere on the north side, with all their food, water, bedding, extra weapons, everything they needed to survive. If Ed and the others couldn't get to it, if they couldn't get over in time and Justin couldn't hang on for them …

Then they'd have to start over again, with nothing.

'What are you waiting for?' he said. 'Let's go!'

DogNut cast off and they drifted out into the Thames. The boat started to turn slowly in the water. The Thames was tidal, which meant that the water could be pushed back up from the sea when the tide was high. Ed reckoned it must be high now because the flow wasn't too fast. They would still be pulled downstream on the current,

though, and would have to try to somehow steer across.

Ed hadn't thought about that. He hoped Jordan knew what he was doing. All he wanted was to collapse on to one of the benches and sleep.

Not yet.

He had to check that somebody was in control of the boat.

He went to the front and climbed the steps to the wheelhouse.

There was broken glass on the floor where the window had been smashed. Jordan was at the wheel; with him were Matt and Archie Bishop. As Ed came in, the three of them were arguing about something.

'Nothing will work without any power,' Archie Bishop was saying.

'It's doing something,' said Jordan, 'the wheel's turning.'

'Let me do that,' said Matt, stepping forward, his face beaming with eager excitement.

'Why you?' Ed asked. 'Do you know about boats or something?'

'This was all meant to be,' said Matt.

Ed sighed. 'What are you on about now?' he asked. 'This isn't the time for your religious crap.'

Matt turned his beam on Ed.

'No, Ed, don't you see?' he said. 'We're being sent downriver to the temple.'

'Please don't start up about St Paul's again, Matt.'

'Listen to me!' Matt shouted, jabbing a grubby finger at the scab on his forehead and making it bleed. 'I have the mark of the Lamb on me. I know the truth!'

'We're not going downriver, Matt,' said Ed. 'We just need to get across to the other side to meet up with the others.'

'No. It was not meant to be like that. We're supposed to go to the temple of the Lamb. This boat was given to us.'

'He's right,' said Archie Bishop. 'It's all written in the papers. The fire, the flood, the battle, the river of blood.'

'What river of blood?'

'Look at it!'

Ed gazed out at the Thames, washed with scarlet.

'*The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood*,' said Matt, his voice low and urgent. '*Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve" …*'

'You're not helping, Matt,' said Ed, weariness eating away at his last few scraps of patience.

'We're crossing to the promised place,' said Matt.

'Bollocks,' Ed snapped. 'We just need to get to the other side. Once

we're there if you want to bugger off down to St Paul's with your silly flag and your silly bits of burnt paper, feel free, but we're not coming with you. OK?'

'We'd have to cross the whole of London, though,' Matt protested. 'This boat can take us straight there.'

'We might not have much choice,' said Jordan. 'The river's taking us that way.'

'Just go across diagonally,' said Ed. 'We need to be near the lorry.'

'I'm trying. Believe me, I'm trying.'

'The river is taking us where we are supposed to go,' said Matt.

'No way,' said Ed.

'My way!' Matt yelled, and he threw himself at Jordan.

Matt tried to wrestle the wheel out of Jordan's grasp, puffing and panting with the effort.

'What are you doing?' Jordan snapped, and batted Matt away. The backhander didn't look like much – Jordan hardly seemed to move – but Matt flew across the wheelhouse and crashed into the door with a grunt. It didn't stop him, though. Instantly he and Archie came back at Jordan and grabbed hold of an arm each.

'Help me, Ed,' Matt gasped.

'Are you nuts?' said Ed, not sure whether to laugh or get angry. He got past the three struggling boys and took the wheel. It was hard to tell which way he should turn it; the boat was drifting out of control in the current, spinning slowly.

Jordan threw Matt and Archie off, sending them sprawling on to the floor. Now Matt threw his arms round Jordan's legs and Archie got up and tried to push him over. Jordan kept his balance and knocked Archie down before kicking Matt away.

Whichever direction Ed spun the wheel it didn't seem to be having any effect on the boat. He soon had no idea which way they were facing and felt a rising sense of panic.

Then he heard Jordan say, 'Is that loaded?' And he turned to see Matt waving an old British Army Browning revolver.

Matt nodded, his face twisted by a wild excitement. It was clear that Jordan didn't know whether to believe him. Did Matt even know how to fire it?

But it would be stupid to risk testing him.

Jordan looked at Ed.

'Do something.'

‘I’m not responsible for him,’ said Ed.

‘He’s one of yours.’

Ed gave a nervous laugh. ‘He doesn’t follow me. He follows the Lamb.’

‘Will he shoot?’

‘He’s crazy enough.’

Now Matt spoke. ‘Get the wheel, Archie,’ he said. ‘Steer us downriver to St Paul’s.’

Archie was shaking. His nose was bleeding and one eye was bruised. He pushed Ed out of the way, took hold of the wheel and tried to take control of the boat.

‘I can’t do it, Matt. I don’t know how.’

‘Let the Lamb guide you!’

‘Use the Force, Luke,’ Ed scoffed, and Matt glowered at him.

‘I can’t do it,’ Archie shouted, his voice high and wobbly.

‘Yes you can!’

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On the lower deck Aleisha was shaking and holding her arm tight to her belly. She was sitting on one of the benches with her back against the windows. Kyle had found a first-aid kit and he and Courtney had disinfected the wound and bandaged it. It had looked bad, ragged and torn by Frédérique's teeth. Aleisha was trying to stay cheerful, but was slipping into shock, shivering, her teeth clattering, her eyes rolling up in her head.

Courtney put her arm round her.

'We're all right now, babe,' she said, and Aleisha forced her grey lips into a smile.

'Yeah.'

Kyle looked out of the windows into the night.

'I'm going to see what's up,' he said. 'We're all over the place. Doesn't feel like no one's driving this thing.'

He walked off but as he got to the exit there was a horrible crunch and the boat lurched to the side. Everyone was thrown to the floor and Courtney was aware of a massive stone bulk passing the windows.

'We've hit something!' she shrieked.

The windows all down the side where Aleisha had been sitting were cracked. Two of them had smashed completely, letting in smoke and the rushing, roaring, gurgling din of the river. There was also a screeching, scraping noise and the sound of splintering wood and breaking glass.

Courtney looked for her friend. Aleisha had fallen to the floor and hit her head on the table on the way down. She was still just conscious, but dazed. Courtney took a step towards her as the boat gave another sudden lurch and tilted over at a crazy angle. Kyle

grabbed Courtney to stop her falling. Aleisha rolled against the side.

'Hold on, Aleisha!' Courtney tried to break free from where Kyle was holding her steady, and the next moment, with a deafening crack, the boat split completely open. A gush of water burst through, reaching in like a giant black hand, and closed round Aleisha. And then it withdrew, sucked out as the boat tilted back the other way.

'Aleisha!' Courtney screamed, but her friend was gone.

'You idiot, Matt,' Ed shouted, picking himself up from where he'd been thrown to the floor by the force of the collision. 'That was Westminster Bridge.'

'We're sinking,' said Archie, clinging on to the wheel to keep from falling over.

'It's worse than that,' said Jordan, looking out of the windows. 'We're breaking up. We need to find the lifeboats.'

'Out there, look!' Archie nodded through the window of the wheelhouse. There was a short deck in front of them with two dinghies tethered to it.

'We'll never all fit on them,' said Ed. 'There must be at least thirty of us.'

'Look for more,' said Jordan, struggling over to the door. 'I'll get these two sorted.'

Matt was staring out at the flames that raged over the south side of the river, his face lit with writhing yellows and scarlets.

'*The third angel sounded his trumpet*,' he said quietly. '*And a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water – the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter*.'

Kyle had got rid of his garden fork and swapped it for a fire axe. He was up on the roof of the top deck with three of Jordan's boys, hacking through the ropes that held four more lifeboats in place. It was tricky and dangerous work with the cruiser lying at such a steep angle, and every few seconds it gave a sharp jolt as the water tugged at it, slowly tearing it in half.

Ed appeared and helped them, clinging on to a bit of rope to keep from falling off. Amazingly, Kyle still seemed to be enjoying himself, as if this was all some mad game.

Kids were swarming over the boat in a panic. There was nowhere to go except up on to the roof or on to the short deck at the front. Ed heard DogNut down below yelling at them not to jump in. He leant over and shouted down to him.

'There's lifeboats up here. We'll get them into the water, but be careful getting in. Jordan's got two more boats at the front.'

The next few minutes were a nightmare. Ed was only dimly aware of all that was going on around him. Kids trying not to fall off the cruiser as she broke up. Other kids trying to get the boats into the water without losing them. Dead bodies and bits of floating wreckage knocking into them. Screams. Shouts. Arguments. Hands burned on ropes. Clothes drenched with water. Courtney yelling in one ear about Aleisha. DogNut yelling, 'Hurry up! Hurry up!' in the other.

Then the kids were spilling off the cruiser as she sank lower in the water, packing the lifeboats and threatening to capsize them. Jordan was in control at the front, snarling at the kids to slow down. Ed was trying to keep some sense of order on the roof.

'Don't aim directly for the lifeboats,' Ed barked as kids lowered

themselves over the side, or jumped or slipped. ‘You’ll sink them. You’ve got to land in the water next to them. The guys in the boats can pull you in.’

The water between the cruiser and the lifeboats was soon thick with splashing kids. It was too dark and too chaotic to tell if anyone was sinking or being swept away. Ed just prayed that most of them would make it.

Now it was his turn. If he left it any longer, the cruiser was going to sink and drag him under.

He launched himself into the air. Hit the water with a punch to his guts. The cold snatched his breath away. He reached out for the nearest lifeboat and then it was gone and he was under the water. Someone had landed on top of him, forcing him down. He felt hard shoes kicking at him. It was freezing and he could sense his body shutting down. A pale face looked at him through the murk, the features frozen into a scream, eyes wide, mouth gaping, then it floated away and he was alone again. The current pulled at him. He wanted to shout but had his mouth clamped shut against the poisonous waters of the Thames.

Then suddenly he was in the fresh stinging air. The light of the fire was blinding him. Strong hands had hold of his jacket and he was being pulled into one of the boats.

It was Kyle, still grinning like a madman. ‘Nearly lost you there, chief,’ he said, dumping Ed in the bottom of the boat. Ed lay there, useless as a landed fish.

‘How many of us made it?’ he croaked once he’d got his voice back. Nobody heard him, so he struggled to sit up. He saw Courtney packed in among the other kids next to DogNut. She was crying.

Ed looked back at the cruiser. It had finally split in two. The back half had sunk, but the top half was still afloat and drifting down the river, half submerged.

Then he saw an amazing sight. Matt and Archie and the four remaining acolytes were standing on top of the wheelhouse roof, like the crew of a submarine coming into harbour. They were holding their banner upright, their faces reflecting the fire that raged over south London. They didn’t look scared or worried at all. Rather they appeared to be quite calm and at peace.

Ed looked at the banner. It was brightly lit by the flames, and the image of the golden boy on it seemed to be glowing. Behind him the other boy, the shadowy one, looked as if he was made of smoke. The way the banner fluttered, the Lamb and the Goat appeared to be alive, moving. And then the lifeboat passed under Waterloo Bridge and that was the last Ed saw of Matt.

The last stragglers were crossing the bridge, the feeblest, the weakest, the sickest, shambling along as behind them the flames tore at the sky, raining down ash and soot.

He'd stayed behind to eat a part of one of the small bodies lying in the road. The others, the stupid ones, just wanted to get away from the fire. Not him. He knew he had to eat. Meat Is Life. He'd stayed there, squatting in the road as the fire ripped into the buildings. It was pretty. He liked fire. Always had done.

The fire couldn't get him, though. It couldn't leap across the road or the round thing, the thing the cars went round, round, the roundabout, the magic roundabout. But there was nothing left for him here. He belched. He was full. He picked up his bundle and walked towards the bridge. They were over there, the ones he needed. He could smell them. The living food.

There was water below him now. He stopped to look. And over there … He knew those houses, the big boys lived there, the bastards, he knew the name …

HP sauce, or something, the jolly green giant.

Big Ben.

Aaaah, it was all too much for him.

All he knew was that the bastards lived in there, in the spiky buildings. The ones who made the laws …

Politicians.

You see. He still had the words in him.

Politicians.

He looked down into the river. It was full of fire and death and pigs.

No, not pigs …

He looked at the boiling colours. He wanted to drop something in, see it splash. That's what you did, wasn't it? There was a game.

Pig sticks.

No.

Not pigs.

Pooh.

Pooh sticks.

Race them under the bridge. Two sticks. See which one came out first the other side. He'd played it with him, the little one, the boy, what was his name …?

Gone now.

They'd played it, racing sticks under a bridge in the park. Played the game. He wanted to drop something in now. He had something. This thing in his hands. Didn't know what it was. Why was he carrying it?

It weighed nothing, just a bundle of scraps and twigs.

A stick, yeah. It was a sort of stick.

He propped it on the wall of the bridge then pushed it over, watched as it turned and fluttered in the air, as if it was trying to fly away. And somehow it turned into a boy. A little angel, flying down …

Down and down it fell.

And then the tiny splash.

Watched it float away under the bridge.

Now what? There was something he was going to do, something about a race and sticks and pigs and a jolly green giant.

It had gone.

No mind. No mind. Get over the water to the other side. Get home. Go see his boy.

His Liam.

That was it. Get home to see Liam.

He turned and walked on.

The first lifeboat bumped into the pier and the kids gave a cheer. They'd been beginning to wonder if they'd ever be able to make it to the north bank, or whether they were going to be swept all the way down to the estuary and out to sea. They'd managed to lash the boats together, which gave them greater stability and protection, but steering the giant raft had proved difficult. There were powerful eddies and currents in the Thames, and the raft had a tendency to spin. The force of the water seemed to grow stronger and stronger, and no matter how hard they tried to aim towards the edge they kept being pulled back into the centre where the flow was strongest. After bumping against Hungerford Bridge they passed under seven more bridges, and each time it caused a mad panic among the kids. The water bunched up and foamed between the pilings and they nearly lost two of the boats in a collision. But as they cleared London Bridge they hit a clear straight stretch of river and finally managed to get some sort of control over the raft. Centimetre by centimetre, metre by metre, they made their way closer to the side. Then they'd seen a modern steel pier sticking out into the river and it had given them something to aim for.

They clawed at the water, sticking their bodies half over the sides and kicking, scrabbling with the few oars they had. At last they'd stopped.

They were on a wide, open reach of the Thames. On the far side was the great hulk of the battleship HMS *Belfast*, which had been run as a tourist attraction. Ahead were the twin gothic towers of Tower Bridge. On this side of the river were the high walls and turrets of the Tower of London.

Ed planted his feet firmly on the steel decking of the pier and hugged Courtney. The two of them were cold and wet and exhausted. They clung to each other laughing and crying at the same time.

The fire hadn't spread this far downriver so it was quite dark. Though the sky to the west was lit by an angry red glow. Ed broke away from Courtney, wiped his face and looked up at the ramparts of the Tower, silhouetted against the sky.

'It was Wiki, wasn't it?' he said. 'Or was it Jibber-jabber? One of them, anyway, said we should come here.'

'I don't know,' said Courtney. 'Where are we?'

'Don't you recognize it? It's the Tower of London.'

'It looks like a castle.'

'That's because it *is* a castle.' Ed laughed. 'The oldest bit was built by William the Conqueror, I think.'

'Who's he?'

'It doesn't matter.' Ed shook his head. 'All that matters is that we've washed up in just about the safest spot we could. This is the perfect place to hide out. No sickos could get to us in there.'

Jordan Hordern was already organizing the kids, shouting at them to form into groups.

'We need to know who's made it and who we've lost,' he barked.

Ed checked his crew. It didn't take long. He and Courtney were the only two left. Jordan had lost five of his boys, either in the fight or when the boat had sunk. Of the third group, the kids who'd joined the fight at the roundabout, nobody really knew how many there had been to start with. Some kids talked of losing friends, but again it had all been so confusing – for all they knew their friends could have crossed Lambeth Bridge safely. Though one or two were certain their friends had disappeared in the water. Ed remembered that pale face sinking past him when he'd gone under.

He tried to shut the image out of his mind.

'We need to get inside the Tower,' said Jordan, who had evidently come to the same conclusion as Ed. 'In the morning we can find food and water, but for now we need somewhere to get warm and dry and safe. We have to assume, though, that there's already people inside. So be ready for a fight.' He took off his glasses and wiped them clean. 'If you all work together and do what I say, you'll be all right. But just remember – I'm in charge. OK? DogNut here is my second in command directly responsible for my boys. That's Ed over there. The one with the scar. He's in charge of everyone else. You do what he says, he does what I say.'

'Who says he's in charge of us?' said a short kid with thick arms and a fat neck.

'I do.'

‘And who says you’re in charge?’

Jordan walked over to the short kid. He didn’t stare at him directly, but stood right next to him and looked out across the river at HMS *Belfast*. Somehow it was more intimidating than if he’d gone eyeball to eyeball with him.

‘Don’t argue with me,’ he said quietly.

‘Listen –’ said the kid, but Jordan cut him off.

‘So you want to be in charge, do you?’

‘Maybe?’

The short kid looked around for support. Nobody seemed keen to back him up.

‘Do you not think I’d better be in charge?’ asked Jordan. His voice low and steady.

‘Yeah, all right,’ said the short kid, and Jordan walked away.

‘I like him. I like his style,’ said Kyle quietly as he came over to stand next to Ed, still holding his fire axe. Then he raised his voice and addressed everyone else. ‘I ain’t got no problems with Ed,’ he said, and gave a big smile. ‘He knows what he’s doing. I saw him fight. This man is a *maniac*! Now, let’s get shifted. I’m freezing my bollocks off here.’

The castle was ringed by two walls: a plain outer wall, and a higher inner wall studded with round towers. The main entrance was via a large turreted gatehouse that was connected to the castle by a narrow walkway over the wide, dry moat.

The gates in the gatehouse were too big and solid to force but there were drainpipes up the outer wall of the castle and DogNut and Kyle volunteered to see if they could climb them. Jordan gave them the go-ahead and they vaulted the railings by the edge of the moat and then sprinted across the grass to the other side.

They stopped at the bottom of the wall and looked up.

‘What d’you reckon?’ DogNut asked.

‘No problem,’ said Kyle. ‘Used to break into houses all the time when I was younger. Race you!’

It proved to be quite easy. The two of them scrambled up the drainpipes and were over the top of the wall in less than a minute. It was another easy climb down the other side where they found the main castle gates unguarded and only secured with a metal bar.

They lifted the bar and five minutes later the kids were tramping into the Tower. Some of them had visited recently with their schools and they showed the party round to where there was another gateway through to the inner courtyard. There was a big open space here. Around the edges were various ancient castle towers and a mismatched jumble of redbrick, Tudor and Victorian houses. The oldest part, the White Tower, a tall square building with a turret at

each corner, stood in the centre of the grounds on a low mound.

The kids assembled in an area to one side that felt like a village green with a chapel at one end and timber-framed houses at the other.

'Looks like there's no one about,' said DogNut.

'Let's find out,' said Kyle, and before anyone could stop him he started shouting. 'Oi! Wakey, wakey! Anyone at home?'

Jordan hurried over to shut him up.

'What are you doing?' he said. 'If there is anyone here, we don't want to wake them up. We'll lose the element of surprise.'

'Why, what was you gonna do?' asked Kyle with a mad grin. 'Slaughter them in their beds? Cut their throats while they sleep?'

'Makes no difference now,' said Jordan. 'Here they come.'

Figures were emerging from one of the houses. Ed had lost his rifle, but he still had his pistol in its holster. He was just about to slip it loose when he saw that they were only other kids, three unarmed boys and a girl, wrapped in coats, looking cold, sleepy and confused.

'Who are you?' said one of the boys with a yawn. He looked like he hadn't eaten in days. He was tall and thin with sunken cheeks and a bad cough. 'How'd you get in?'

'Who's in charge here?' asked Jordan.

'No one really.' The boy shrugged.

'What about Tomoki?' said the girl.

'Yeah, Tomoki, I suppose.'

'Go and get him.'

'What?'

'Go and get this Tomoki,' said Jordan. 'I want to talk to him.'

'He'll be asleep.'

'Then wake him up.'

'I'll go,' said a younger boy, and he trotted off towards the timber-framed building.

The two groups stood there staring at each other. Ed was shivering and just wanted to go inside and get warm. But Jordan wasn't moving.

'How many of you are there living here?' he asked the boy with the cough.

'Dunno,' he replied. 'Maybe thirty?'

'OK,' was all that Jordan said.

In a minute the small boy returned with an older boy who had long straight black hair and oriental features.

'What's going on?' he said sleepily as he approached. 'Who are you?'

'I am Jordan Hordern. Are you Tomoki?'

'Yeah.' Tomoki stopped and squared up to Jordan.

'And you're in charge in here?'

‘I suppose so.’

‘No one seems very sure of it.’

‘All right, yes,’ said Tomoki. ‘I *am* in charge here.’

‘Not any more, you’re not,’ said Jordan.

‘What?’

‘From now on I’m in charge.’

Tomoki laughed. ‘You can’t just walk in here, and –’

‘That’s just the point, though, isn’t it?’ said Jordan.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We did just walk in here.’ Jordan stepped towards Tomoki with such an air of quiet menace that Tomoki fell silent and backed away. He was shorter than Jordan and much less confident.

More kids were emerging from the buildings, curious and sleep-addled. Some were armed, but they held back. They didn’t look like they had the stomach for a fight.

‘You’ve got the best site in London,’ said Jordan, looking at the White Tower rather than at Tomoki. ‘The perfect place to live. A castle. Easy to defend. Full of weapons. And what are you doing? There’s no guards posted. The gates weren’t even locked. All we had to do was climb a couple of drainpipes and we were in.’

‘Yeah, well, mothers and fathers can’t climb drainpipes, can they?’ Tomoki protested.

Jordan pressed on.

‘You don’t deserve to be in charge here,’ he said. ‘And if you don’t care about running this place properly, then you shouldn’t be worried that I’m taking over.’

Tomoki gave a dismissive shrug and a grunt. He’d been half asleep when he came out, with no idea what was going on. Now he was pulling himself together.

‘We outnumber you,’ he said evenly. ‘So let’s not get into an argument, OK? Now, I don’t mind you staying here – we need all the help we can get, quite frankly. It hasn’t been easy for us. But you can’t expect to walk in here and take over just like that.’

‘I agree,’ said Jordan. ‘Let’s not get into an argument. I don’t like arguments.’

‘Good.’

‘So I’ll fight you for it.’

‘You want to fight me?’ Tomoki sounded incredulous.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s not the way things are decided.’

‘It is now,’ said Jordan. ‘The world’s changed. So, come on.’

‘No,’ said Tomoki, and he backed away as Jordan advanced on him.

‘Fight me,’ said Jordan.

He kept on coming and Tomoki was stumbling backwards. In the end he put up a hand to Jordan's chest to try to stop him.

Jordan clipped him. The movement was fast and casual at the same time. Tomoki's head jerked to the side and he crumpled to his knees.

Jordan stood over him for a moment then helped him to his feet. Tomoki wobbled on shaking legs, stunned and groggy.

'Nothing personal,' Jordan said quietly, and then he turned to face the ring of kids who had come out to see what was going on.

'If the rest of you want to fight us, that's fine. But you will lose. We've battled our way across town to get here – you will not be able to beat us. Tomoki can keep his position here, as your representative, but from now on we all work together and you all do what I say. If anyone doesn't agree with me, come over here and I will talk to you.'

Nobody moved.

Ed felt an uncomfortable mixture of embarrassment and pride. He didn't like Jordan's cold bullying tactics, but he couldn't deny that he was probably the best man for the job, and when it came down to it, Ed, like everyone else, just wanted to get this over with quickly so that he could go and lie down somewhere and fall asleep.

'Good,' said Jordan. 'Then it's decided.'

Ed sighed and closed his eyes.

Safe at last.

The morning sun was bright. Blinding him. He covered his face with his hands. He knew this place. A big open square, a pill, a pillar, big stone pillar in the middle. The statue of a man on the top. The man had a name. He was a hero. Yeah, what was his name? He had one eye and a hat.

Nelson.

Yes. He grinned. He still knew things. He was going to beat the disease. Hadn't he told them? He was going to live. He was going to go home and live a happy life.

Home.

He knew the way to go now. He knew this bit of … Where was he? What was the name of this place?

Nelson.

Lord Nelson. Not Nelson. Lord Lumsden. London. Lord London. London Town.

As he limped across the square, a mess of birds took flight all around him, swirling up into the sky and confusing him. He flailed at them, cursing and swearing.

They were pigs.

Pigs might fly.

Pigeons too.

The next thing he knew he had one in his hand. He'd caught it mid-air. Like a golfer. A goalie. His grin grew wide. He was king of this place. He should be up on top of that pillar. Lord London! That was him. He squeezed the bird until he could feel its bones crack. Then he stuffed the corpse into the pocket of his jogging pants. He was cold. He'd lost his shirt in a fight over a dead boy. It had been

ripped anyway.

The boy done that. Before.

He'd make that boy behave himself.

He'd won the fight, but lost his … what was the word? He'd had it just now. Save it for later.

Shirt. Yes. His shirt.

Something glittering caught his eye. An overturned stall. It had scarves and hats and …

Souvenirs.

That was a good word. A hard word to remember. How many people knew that word?

He shouted it.

'Souvenir! Souvenir! Souvenir!'

He came to the stall and rifled through the stuff, throwing aside rubbish and tat and souvenirs.

Tat. Tatty souvenirs.

Then he found a sleeveless vest. He held it up. It looked good. The colours pleased him. There was a pattern on it, a picture, red stripes, one way and one way.

A criss-cross.

Cross.

He saluted.

'Lord Nelson, sir,' he said, the words clear in his head, but coming out as a slurred grunt.

It was a flag.

The cross of his country.

He pulled it over his head. Yes. He was the king now. The king of London, the king of the world. And he was going to get strong and take his revenge on those boys. Those clever-clever school kids who thought they could beat him.

Him! Lord Nelson. Lord London. King of souvenirs.

And worse. They done bad. They took his Liam from him. Yes. They killed him. He'd been looking after Liam and they killed him.

They couldn't do that to him. He was a hero. He was Charlie George. Saint Charlie. Saint George, the pigeon slayer. Not a pigeon, a dragon. Yes. St George. And he was going to kill every dragon in the world.

But first he was going to go home and see his boy. And he was going to take his boy to the football. To the big church, what were they called? Catherine wheel? No. Catholic. Cathedral. Yes. His own cathedral. The stadium. The theatre of dreams.

Home.

The Arsenal.

One Year Later

Ed was standing on the battlements with Kyle, looking at the Thames as it flowed sluggishly past. It had rained the night before and everything glistened with wet. Now, though, a patch of blue appeared in the sky, the sun broke through the clouds and everywhere was lit up gold and silver.

He turned his scarred face towards Kyle and smiled.

'The sun actually feels warm,' he said.

Kyle grinned back at him.

'You're right, skipper,' he said. 'Soon be summer.'

'Slow down a bit,' said Ed. 'We haven't had spring yet.'

'I never did work out which way round the seasons went.' Kyle laughed. 'Account of me dyslexia. If you asked me, I couldn't even tell you how long we been here.'

'Feels like forever.'

Ed thought back to when they'd first arrived. The first few weeks at the Tower had been very busy. Jordan had kicked everyone into shape, insisting that the key to survival was organization. Left to themselves the kids would have behaved like kids. They would have drifted into anarchy and squabbling. But Jordan wasn't going to let that happen. He had a vision, and he had drive. He was going to make sure they survived.

He'd started by organizing a military system. Guards and soldiers and scavenging parties. The White Tower was full of weapons and armour, and the buildings were well protected. Ed was made captain of the Tower Guard, in charge of defending the castle. He was a strong solid figure who everyone trusted. Knowing that he was watching out for them made the younger kids feel safe and secure. Kyle acted as a

sort of personal bodyguard. Ed could do nothing to shake the big square-headed boy off; wherever he went, Kyle was at his side.

When spring arrived, the moat had been dug over and planted with seeds. The kids had been inspired by old photographs they'd found showing the moat during wartime when it had been turned into a giant vegetable garden.

Spring had turned into summer and the kids' spirits had been lifted by the light and warmth and sense of new life. But summer had drifted into autumn and autumn into winter. Food was always short. The scavenging parties had to search buildings further and further away to find stuff to eat. Twice they'd struck lucky and found warehouses stacked with provisions, but despite rationing even that had soon started to run low.

The worst part was the lack of fresh food. The vegetable gardens hadn't been very productive. The kids had a lot to learn and in the winter the Thames had risen and flooded the moat, so they'd lost all their crops. They raided health food shops and chemists for supplements, vitamins and minerals, but they were no substitute for real fruit and vegetables. Lots of the kids had got sick; with their poor diet and no proper doctors there was nothing they could do about it. Too many had died.

With the winter had come the cold and the dark, and attacks on the scavenging parties from sickos had become more frequent. They'd been just as desperate and hungry as the kids. It had snowed in January, and while some of the kids enjoyed playing in it, the relentless freezing dampness made everyone miserable. At night they'd huddled together in big piles like hibernating insects. The death rate rose. The kids were kept busy carting bodies away to be dropped into the icy Thames.

To Ed it had seemed like the winter was never going to end, so now feeling the sun on his back filled him with fresh hope. A year. They'd survived for a whole year. Hard to believe. And now it was possible, just possible, that they were going to make it. The world wasn't going to end.

Ed had been so busy, so tired at night, so distracted by everything that needed to be done that his birthday had come and gone without him even noticing. He'd realized with a shock one day that he must be fifteen. He'd kept himself to himself for a few days but had shown no symptoms apart from a mild cough, and as all the kids had constant sore throats, coughs and colds he didn't worry too much about that.

He smiled. In a couple of weeks he would be sixteen. It looked like Justin had been right. Whatever the sickos had got, the kids weren't going to get it as well.

'We're alive,' he said, and Kyle looked confused.

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I mean we’re *alive*, Kylo. Against all the odds we’re standing here, breathing.’ He slapped the top of the wall and gave a great whoop of joy. Kyle shook his head and looked at him like he was nuts. Kyle didn’t ever really think too deeply about anything.

There was a shout and DogNut appeared. He’d shown his strength and reliability in the last year and was well respected by the other kids. Jordan had made him captain of the Pathfinders, the name he’d given to the scavengers.

‘See that!’ he said cheerily, turning his face to the sky. ‘Sun’s out at last!’

Ed smiled at him. ‘Better get some of your guys to find us some sunblock,’ he said.

DogNut laughed and settled next to him, arms over the wall. ‘Feels good.’

‘I was just thinking back to when we first arrived,’ said Ed.

‘I think about them mad days in south London sometimes,’ said DogNut, ‘and it all seems like a dream, or a film I watched once a long time ago.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Ed.

‘Do you ever wonder what happened to the others?’

‘Used to,’ said Ed. ‘Not so much any more. Hardly remember them, to tell you the truth.’

‘You must remember them?’ said DogNut. ‘They was your mates.’

‘All my close friends died,’ said Ed quietly. ‘Malik, Bam, Jack …’

‘What was the nerd called, who drove the lorry?’

‘Justin,’ said Ed. ‘Couldn’t forget him. And there was little Wiki and his mate, Jibber-jabber. Then there was, God, what was he called?’

‘Who?’

‘Guy who was always reading? Chris Marker! That’s it, and Kwanele.’

‘Which one was Kwanele?’ DogNut asked.

‘Guy who was always really well dressed.’

‘Oh, yeah. The Zulu dude. See, you *do* remember!’

‘Yeah. Just needed to jog my brain.’

‘What was he called, the religious nut?’ DogNut asked.

‘Mad Matt,’ said Ed quietly. ‘Good riddance to him, I say. It was his fault the boat sank and Aleisha drowned. He could have killed us all. But the others. I hope they made it all right. They had all that food on the lorry, and that weird kid, David, watching out for them, so I guess they’re probably holed up somewhere like us.’

‘Don’t you never think about Brooke?’ DogNut asked.

‘Oh, yeah, Brooke.’ Ed blew out his breath noisily through his

nose. ‘Think about her now and then, I guess.’

‘I think about her all the time, man,’ said DogNut. ‘I mean, back in the day, I knew I was waiting my turn. She was hot on you –’

‘Until I got this,’ Ed interrupted, putting a hand to the jagged scar that pulled his face out of shape.

‘Is that why you ain’t interested in her?’ DogNut asked.

‘What d’you mean?’

‘You think she won’t like you no more?’

‘I don’t really care,’ said Ed.

‘Don’t you want to find out what happened to her?’

‘I’ve not really thought about it, to tell you the truth, DogNut. There’s been too much going on, just trying to stay alive. Yeah, I mean, obviously now and then I do wonder.’

‘I do more than wonder,’ said DogNut. ‘She had her problems, but she was *tough*, man, and I like that in a girl. She’s the sort of gyaldem you *need* in times like this. Plus, she was choong, bruv, *bare* choong.’

‘What’re you saying, DogNut?’ Ed asked. ‘You want to go and look for her?’

‘We should be finding out what other kids are up to out there, man,’ said DogNut. ‘We can’t just sit behind these walls and pray that the world’s gonna go away.’

‘But you’re captain of the Pathfinders.’

‘Yeah, so I should be exploring! I’ll clear it with the general. He won’t have no beef with me. Things is quiet here. I’ve talked to some of the other kids, and a few of them want to come along. They got split up from brothers and sisters and best mates. Courtney, too, she misses Brooke.’

‘Well, good luck to you, mate,’ said Ed.

‘Reason I’m telling you, Ed,’ said DogNut, ‘I thought you might want to come with us.’

Ed turned away and looked back at the castle grounds. Kids everywhere busy. Safe. It was like a little town.

‘This is my home, DogNut,’ he said. ‘*These* are my people now.’

In the days after DogNut left Ed thought about their conversation. He hadn’t told the whole truth to DogNut. His friends were still with him more than he’d let on. He had bad dreams most nights in which Jack was still alive. He’d come at him out of the darkness, his wine-coloured birthmark splashed down one side of his face. He always looked sad and angry, and always asked Ed why he’d abandoned him and left him for dead, and then Ed would see boils on Jack’s skin and realize he had the disease, and he’d wake up gasping for breath.

All the kids were plagued by nightmares. It was understandable really, but there also seemed to be something strange about this part

of town. This was the edge of the old City of London, the historic heart of the capital since Roman times. It was easy to believe that there was some ancient magic living deep in the stones here. The kids never went into the City itself, what had been the financial district before the collapse, an area of offices and skyscrapers and old, old churches. They'd made it a no-go zone. Not only was there little food to be found in those concrete and glass canyons, there was also a creepy, unsettling atmosphere and the sickos who lived there were dangerous and unpredictable.

One rainy evening Ed and Kyle were out guarding a works party who were securing the gates at the Tower Hill underground station. The kids had been meaning to seal the place up for some time. The dark tunnels below were a potential hiding place for sickos. The boys were alert and well armed. No kid would have dreamt of leaving the castle grounds without some kind of weapon. Ed carried a knife, a heavy sword in a scabbard and a crossbow. His pistol had long since run out of ammunition, but he kept it by his bed as a reminder of the old days. Kyle carried a halberd. It was the perfect defensive weapon, a cross between a spear and an axe.

It had been an unsettling day. There had been some sort of disturbance in the no-go zone. Sickos were on the move. They usually kept well away from the Tower, they knew it was dangerous for them there, but today the normal rhythm had been upset and scouting Pathfinders reported seeing gangs of them as near as Aldgate and Fenchurch Street.

'I'm gonna take another look round,' said Kyle. 'I'm getting itchy standing here doing nothing.'

'All right,' said Ed, 'but be careful.'

Kyle grinned and slapped him on the back. 'When am I ever careful?' he said, and walked off with his halberd over his shoulder, chuckling and muttering to himself.

Ed felt his face, running his fingertips along the bumpy scar that ran from his forehead down almost to his chin. The wound was aching tonight, aching and prickly. He wasn't a superstitious boy, but when his scar hurt like this he sometimes had the feeling it was trying to warn him of something. He never talked about this with any of his friends for fear that they would accuse him of turning into Harry Potter.

He heard footsteps and the jangle of metal and saw a group of kids coming through the underpass that ran under the main road next to the Tower. Jordan Hordern was at their head. He was wearing a breastplate and helmet that looked slightly incongruous with his battered old spectacles. The four boys with him all carried halberds.

'Weird night,' he said when he saw Ed.

‘You can feel it too?’ Ed asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Jordan. ‘Everyone’s on edge. Maybe there’s a thunderstorm coming. What’re you doing out here, anyway?’

‘Finally getting round to sealing off the station. The way things are, we wanted to try and get it all done today. The guys are just finishing.’

‘You should bring them in,’ said Jordan. ‘Whether they’re finished or not. It’s not gonna be safe out here tonight.’

‘They should be packing up now.’

They walked over to the station gates where, sure enough, the works party were putting their tools away. Jordan and his team helped them by priming the wind-up torches that they carried and aiming the beams at the tool bags.

Just as they were all ready to go Kyle came back, looking concerned.

‘You need to come and look at this,’ he said quietly.

‘What is it?’ Jordan asked.

‘See for yourself.’

Jordan told the others to stay out of sight and he and Ed and two of his guards followed Kyle back the way he had come. Keeping close together they walked past an old bit of Roman wall and along the side of an ugly modern grey brick building that offered them some cover, moving quickly and silently. When they got to the end of the office block, Kyle stopped and nodded towards the road. Ed crept forward to the corner and cautiously peered round.

He looked up the road towards the railway bridge and gasped, sucking in air and holding it in his lungs. He couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

He pulled back and turned to Jordan.

‘Take a look,’ he said.

Now it was Jordan’s turn. Ed waited for his response, wondering if it would be the same as his. Had he really seen what he thought he’d seen? He frowned and rubbed his scar. It was aching again. He told himself he was being stupid, he was imagining things, haunted by the weird atmosphere of the day.

At last Jordan ducked back from the corner and looked at Ed.

‘It can’t be,’ he whispered.

Ed made a move to take another look when Kyle grabbed him and pulled him back. The four of them crouched there in the darkness as two people walked past the end of the building along the road towards the Tower.

They were two small boys. They couldn’t have been more than nine or ten years old, dirty and exhausted, wide-eyed, delirious even. They looked like they could hardly stand up, let alone walk. They

were soaked by the thin rain that drizzled down relentlessly.

But what caused Ed to hold his breath was that the two of them exactly resembled the boys on Matt's religious banner. The one that everyone had laughed at when Harry Ryan had written 'Angus Day' on it.

The Lamb and the Goat.

One boy was slightly in front of the other, just as the Lamb had been depicted on the banner. He was wearing a filthy white sweat top and had fair hair and pale skin; the second boy had wild, dark hair and his skin was so grubby he looked almost black. He was hanging back behind the first kid like his shadow.

'It's a coincidence,' Ed whispered. 'It has to be.'

'We should be careful,' said Jordan. 'They've come from the no-go zone. There's something not right about them.'

Ed was getting freaked out. He'd never known Jordan to be unsure of anything before.

'Bloody hell, Jordan,' he whispered. 'Don't tell me you're starting to believe in Matt's crap?'

'You thought exactly the same thing as I did when you saw them, Ed.'

'Come off it, Jordan, they're just little boys.'

But even as he said it Ed doubted his own words. Strange things had happened in the world. If Matt was right, that just might be God and the devil over there, walking right past them, not five metres away.

Don't be an idiot.

Ed straightened up. 'Stop still. Don't move.'

The boys froze.

'We're kids,' the fair-haired one shouted, without turning round. 'Only kids.'

'Let's hope so,' said Ed under his breath, then he shouted back at the boy. 'I can see that. Where have you come from?'

'Waitrose,' said the kid.

Ed wanted to laugh, but stopped himself. It was too ridiculous. They hadn't come from heaven. They'd come from a supermarket.

'Waitrose?'

The little boy turned round. 'In Holloway.'

'Where's that?'

'North London. Past Camden Town.'

Ed tried to figure out how far that was. His geography of London wasn't great but he was pretty sure that Camden was a fair distance away.

'You've come all the way from there?'

'Yes – I'm trying to get to Buckingham Palace.'

This was getting more and more surreal.

'Well, you're more than a little lost,' he pointed out.

'I know,' said the boy. 'Please, we're very tired and hungry. We've been running from grown-ups all day.' He sounded scared and shaky, not like a god at all.

'Is it just the two of you?'

'Yes.'

Ed and the others walked into the road and approached the boys.

'Will you help us?' the dark-haired boy called to them. 'We can't go on. These are our last legs.'

Ed whispered to Jordan. 'You satisfied? They're just kids.'

'I know,' said Jordan. 'But you can't be too careful. It's been an unusual day. And you must admit …'

'Yeah, I know, but I mean …' Ed paused, he was trying to convince himself more than Jordan that there was nothing supernatural about these two boys. 'You don't … *feel* anything?'

'You said it, Ed, they're just kids.'

'Yeah.'

Ed went over to the boys, taking off his helmet. The boys looked at his scar with wide eyes. He knew the effect it had on people so he smiled so as not to scare them and knelt down in front of them.

'How old are you two?' he asked.

'Nine,' they both said together.

'And you've made it all the way here from north London?'

'The shrimp did,' said the dark-haired kid. 'I been living round about Spitalfields but I got into the tunnels and I was sore lost and –'

'Whoa, hold on, not so fast.' Ed put up his hand to stop him. 'So you've been in Spitalfields? Who's been looking after you?'

The dark-haired kid shrugged. 'No one. There was some other muckers with me one time, but they're all dead now, you can count on it. It was only me. But then I found the hobbit. We been helping each other. We're mates.'

Ed shook his head and snorted with laughter. 'And here we were thinking we were pretty clever living in the Tower, pretty tough. You two kids have shown us up as a right bunch of wimps.'

'Is it safe there?' said the fair-haired boy.

'In the Tower?' Ed thought about it. 'Safe enough.'

'You sure?'

'You've been through a lot, haven't you?'

The fair-haired boy nodded.

'Well, it's as safe as anywhere, I guess. Safer than out here on the streets. Safer than down in the tube tunnels, that's for sure.'

'Will you take us there?'

'Sure. Why not?'

‘And we’ll really be safe? It’s just you? Just kids?’

‘There’s sixty-seven of us live there,’ Ed explained. ‘All kids. All ages. It’s not the greatest life in the world. But it’s a life. You’re safe now, mate.’

The two boys burst into tears.

Ed nearly joined them. He held them to his chest until they stopped crying, and then picked them up so that they sat against his hips and carried them towards the Tower.

As they walked along, an image of the banner came into his head once again.

Maybe, just maybe, Matt had been right all along.